

REB'S LEGION CLUB 45's, INVESTIGATED

by Steven Lasker

The Hollywood Recordings

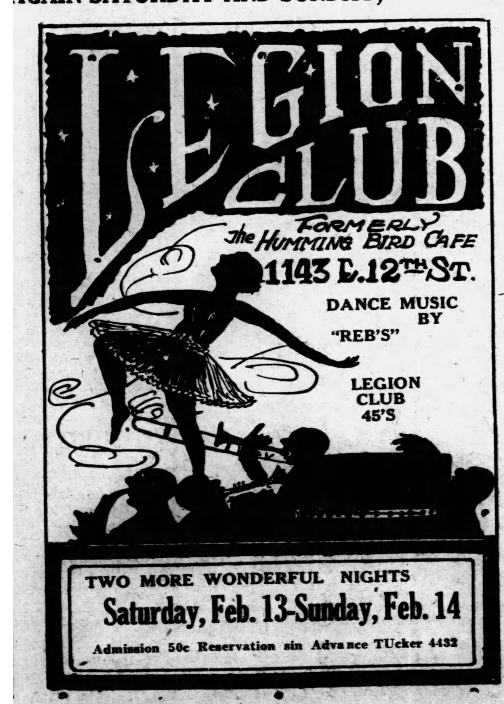
"Reb's Legion Club 45's" waxed two sides for the Hollywood Record Company, *My Mammy's Blues* and *Sheffield Blues*. The company's files are unknown, probably lost, and the record itself bears neither catalog number nor matrix numbers. The session has been misdated to circa November 1924 in discographies, probably based on the copyright registration for the first title, which dates to the previous month. The song, by John C. Spikes and Benjamin F. ("Reb") Spikes, was from the 1924 show *Steppin' High*. The Hollywood issue exists in two label variants. Some copies show *My Mammy's Blues* (from "*Steppin' High*"), while others mistakenly show this same song as *Steppin' High*. Both are musically identical. Rust's *Jazz Records* (sixth edition) and Tom Lord's *The Jazz Discography* show this to be a three-title session; only two songs survive.

The personnel on the record was a mystery to discographers until September 1973, when Andrew Blakeney (1898-1992) mentioned to Al Vollmer that he'd played all the trumpet solos on the session, and identified the others on the date. The personnel was first written up in *Storyville* 52 (April-May 1974): Andrew Blakeney, Russell Massengale, t; Leon White, tb; Les Hite, cl/as/v; William Calhoun, cl/ts/v; Reb Spikes, bsx; Gene Wright, p; possibly a banjo player [who might be Joe Parker, more below]; Lionel Hampton, d. This same lineup appears in the fourth (1978) and subsequent editions of Rust's *Jazz Records*, also in *Hamp: An Autobiography* by Lionel Hampton with James Haskins, except that a banjo player isn't mentioned, and Russell Massengale's name appears as Andrew Massingale. He was identified as Russell Massengale in a June 20, 1925 *Chicago Defender* report (quoted in *Storyville* 2002-3, p. 214) and in a caption to a photo of the band that appears in *Storyville* 21 (Feb-Mar 1969).

In a May 1980 interview for the Jazz Oral History Project (JOHP), Reb Spikes (1888-1982) recalled:

We had rehearsed ... uh, I can't think of the name of the song. It was very popular at that time, and when we got out to this Hollywood studio [Spikes retained an undated letter from the "Hollywood Recording Company, 6276 Hollywood Boulevard, Recording at 33 1/3 or 80 RPM, Studio Space, Sound Effects, Recording Orchestras"] to make the record [...] there was a big white band playing what we was gonna play, so we didn't have anything else

AGAIN SATURDAY AND SUNDAY;



rehearsed, and so they said, "Whatta we gonna do, Reb?" I say, "We'll play a bunch of blues, and we'll call it *Sheffield Blues*. We'll start up like this we'll start to playin', and then there'll be a knock on the door [knocks] and you say 'Who's there?' [shouts] 'This is Sheffield, every tub!'"

On the record, four loud knocks are heard, followed by Les Hite asking "Who is it?" William Calhoun shouts, "This is Officer Sheffield, every tub! Uh-uh, don't pour it in the sink." The record concludes with Les Hite saying, "C'mon into the wagon." (Vocal identifications by Blakeney. Reb Spikes recalled [Tom Stoddard, *Jazz on the Barbary Coast*] it was he who shouted "Sheffield! Open the door!," but that phrase isn't heard on the record.)

Maceo B. Sheffield, an LAPD officer whose beat was Central Avenue, provided the inspiration for the title *Sheffield Blues*. When breaking down a door in a raid, he would famously shout "Every tub" (short for "Every tub on its own bottom"), letting the occupants know they were headed for jail. The label of the Hollywood record shows the composers to be

"Reb's Legion Club 45's" Hollywood record labels for both tunes including variations. Courtesy of Dave Hignett and Taku Murayama.





"Spikes Pods of Pepper Orchestra", May or June, 1925. Left to right: Fulton Alexander, d; Gene Wright, p; Edgar Williams (standing in for the vocalist); Reb Spikes, sax/leader; Max (aka Mack) Shaw, bb; Russell Massengale, t; Leon White, tb; Bill Perkins, bj. Photo by Hartsook. Print (ex-Reb Spikes) courtesy of Mark Berresford. Photo restoration by Dave Hignett and Taku Murayama.

Note: This photo was published in the 1982 (but not the 1998) edition of Tom Stoddard's "Jazz on the Barbary Coast." The caption lists the personnel as above with two exceptions: The man on the right is shown as "----Perkins, banjo." The *Chicago Defender* of June 20, 1925 cited above lists Bill Perkins as the banjo player in the "Spikes Pods of Pepper Orchestra", and lists Fulton Alexander as the band's drummer. The caption in Stoddard shows the man on the left to be "Ellsworth (?), drums and dancer," but Kevin Coffey notes he's "more likely to be Alexander than any Ellsworth. The Ellsworths were a fairly prominent LA family, and included musicians like trumpeter Milton Ellsworth, but I corresponded with one of Milton's nieces who did not think that the man in the photo had any connection to their family. Nor can I find any other Ellsworth candidates. Given the fact that Max Shaw is in the photo and he was with Spikes only about four months, during which Fulton Alexander was the drummer until as little as two weeks before the arrest of Shaw, Strong and Hampton, I think this makes it likely that 'Ellsworth' is Fulton Alexander unless there is evidence to the contrary."

"Hite & Wright." Hite's participation rules out the "c. November 1924" date shown in discographies since he didn't arrive in California until June 1925.

The *Chicago Defender* of June 20, 1925 (p. 8, cited in *Storyville* 2002-3 on p. 214) noted

Spikes 'Pods of Pepper' orchestra started last week at Redonda [sic] Beach on 4-month contract. Personnel: Russell Massengale, c; Leon White, tb; James "Kid" Carson, cl/sax; B. F. Spikes, sax; Gene Wright, p; Bill Perkins, bj; Max Shaw, bb; Fulton Alexander, d.

Lionel Hampton recalled it as a place "where the girls sit around and a guy pays a nickel to dance with one. The girls split fifty-fifty with the house."

In an unpublished letter to Frank Driggs dated April 20, 1960, Les Hite (1903-62) recalled:

I arrived in California June 1925. My first job was with Reb Spikes Orch. playing the Redondo Beach Ballroom, at Redondo Beach, California. George Orendorff, Jimmy Strong and I joined the band at the same time; I sent for

Lionel Hampton, as we all had been playing around Chicago, Ill. together. He came around August or September that year. We worked there until around October which was pretty chilly for a beach resort. Jimmy Strong went back to Chicago — George Orendorff joined the Quality Serenaders and I joined "Papa" Mutt's Dixieland Band at the Lyons Den in Culver City, California.

The band's tenure at Redondo Beach, a community about 20 miles south, south-west of Central Avenue's main business and entertainment district, was marred by a scandal reported in the *L.A. Times*, *Variety*, *The California Eagle* and *The Chicago Defender*. The story first appeared in the *L.A. Times* on September 12, datelined September 11. The most complete account appeared in *Variety* on September 16, and is quoted here:

Three members of the Spikes Brothers Orchestra, playing at the Redondo Beach dance hall are under arrest on a

charge of contributing to the delinquency of several minor white girls.

Chief of Police Henry at Redondo Beach is making an investigation to obtain additional information from other white girls concerning the three men, who are Max Shaw, James Stang and G.L. Hampton [L.E. Hampton per the *Times* report]. The men are now confined in the Redondo Beach jail.

The arrest was brought about by an investigation carried on by Policewoman Emma Crook, who says the men exchanged notes with white girls at a café in Redondo Beach, afterwards enticing them to a bungalow in Los Angeles. [According to the *Times* report, 'a general investigation was conducted by Policewoman Eva Kopp and Detective-Sergeant Alder, including the questioning of many girls, who have been attending dances at the Pavilion.']

Chief Henry says that the men confessed to taking the girls to Los Angeles.

Residents of Redondo Beach are furious over the condition that has arisen. They will petition the city officials to refuse permission to colored bands and entertainers to play or entertain in the city in the future.

Shaw, Strang [sic] and Hampton, when arraigned before Judge Moody, pleaded guilty to undue familiarity with three minor white girls and were sentenced to 190 days in the county jail [after failing to meet an alternative fine of \$300 each according to the *Times* account].

One of the men confessed that he gave the girls liquor and that frequently would be seen in the company of white girls on the streets.

In search of further details, I canvassed the archives at the L.A. County Hall of Records but was unable to locate any relevant court records. Colin Hancock found no relevant records on Westlaw.

Lionel Hampton, Jimmy Strong and Max Shaw went to trial in early September 1925. Their 190-day sentence would have been completed sometime in March 1926. Hampton was apparently released early: In a 1978 JOHP interview, Mrs. Paul Howard recalled that her husband and George Orendorff "got him out" of a jail in "Long Beach" and brought him to Los Angeles where he joined Paul Howard's Quality Serenaders. Hampton was 17.

The *California Eagle* (January 15, 1926, courtesy of Kevin Coffey) reported that "Bonny [sic] Clay's Rhythm Hounds" and "Reb Spikes Legion Club 45's" were the orchestras that played for dances at the Legion Club on Saturday and Sunday nights, January 9 and January 10, respectively, and would return on the following weekend. This is the earliest-known appearance of the billing "Reb's Legion Club 45's," named after the American Legion's Benjamin J. Bowie Post No. 228, a few doors east of Central Avenue at 1126 E. 46th Street.

The *Pittsburgh Courier* (February 27, 1926, courtesy of Kevin Coffey) noted that "Reb's Red Hot 45's orchestra" were still packing the American Legion Club at dances on Saturday and Sunday nights and named the members of the orchestra: Russell Masengale [sic], t; Leon White, tb; Reb Spikes, sax; Gene Wright, p; Joe Parker, bj; Miner [sic] Hall and Amile Rabey, d. Kevin Coffey notes that the banjo on the band's Hollywood record was likely played by Parker.

Andrew Blakeney, in his 1982 JOHP interview, recalled that he arrived in California from Chicago on Thanksgiving Day (November 26) of 1925. He recalled that at the Reb's Legion

Club record date, Hampton was so loud the recording director had to place him at a distance from the other musicians. He estimated the date of the session as "about March 1926." His memory strikes me as remarkable, and I can think of no reason to doubt his recollection. (Blakeney recalled that his first record date was with "Sonny Clay's Plantation Orchestra". That session was held in L.A. on February 2, 1926. Rust misidentifies him on this session as "William Blakeney." His actual first name was Andrew.)

Hampton remained in California until 1936, when he left to join the Benny Goodman Quartet. His arrest went unmentioned in his 1989 autobiography *Hamp*. Jimmy Strong returned to Chicago where he soon joined Carroll Dickerson's orchestra.

Max Shaw



Headshots of Max Shaw in black and white, and cropped from: Left: "Spikes Pods Of Pepper Orchestra" photo above. Courtesy of Dave Hignett and Taku Murayama.

Right: Detail from Duke Ellington's band photo from August 12, 1926. Courtesy of Connecticut Museum of Culture and History.

Max (aka Mack) Shaw moved to New York, where he recorded with the "Clarence Williams Stompers" on April 7, 1926 (see *VJM* 191, p. 17), and joined "Duke Ellington's Washingtonians" the following month. Ellington (*Down Beat*, June 7, 1962, reprinted in Mark Tucker's *The Duke Ellington Reader*, p. 337) recalled:

The police, gangsters, or somebody had caught Mack out in Chicago, beaten his face in and broken all the bones. This cat would be blowing his tuba and blow out a loose bone. He had a whole lot of loose bones in his face, and he'd just put them together again and continue blowing!

Ellington's first biographer, Barry Ulanov, noted "Max had a broken jaw bone. He took quantities of aspirin (mixed with whisky) to keep the pain from felling him."

A photo of the Spikes band taken in May or June of 1925 shows Shaw with an unblemished face. A photo of Ellington's band taken on August 12, 1926 shows severe damage to the left side of Shaw's face, likely inflicted by blow(s) from a California policeman's strong right hook.

Shaw's reported mistreatment reminds us that police brutality in America wasn't confined to the bad old days and the Deep South. The recent deaths of George Floyd and too many others remind us that racism and police brutality persist to this day.

Kudos

Grateful acknowledgements to Kevin Coffey, Dave Hignett, Colin Hancock and Taku Murayama.