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BROOKLYN RAIL

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE



MAILINGLIST

Music

December 1st, 2003

Eddie Durham: Forgotten Guitar Pioneer

I discovered Eddie Durham one night not long ago, as I tuned up my radio to the marvelously pedantic Phil Schaap on WKCR-FM.

Phil was playing the legendary “Kansas City Six” (and “Five”) sessions from 1938, fourteen small-combo cuts featuring Basie alumni, produced by John Hammond for Milt Gabler’s unprofitable, idealistic Commodore label. Durham, on electric guitar, shone even in the stellar company of Lester Young and Buck Clayton. His playing had the kind of rare originality that makes you sit up and say, WHO THE HELL IS THIS GUY?

Which I’ve been investigating since that night. Here are the facts.

Durham (of African-American/Native American heritage) was born in San Marcos, Texas, in 1906. His father, who “played the fiddle at square dances,” taught him to both read and notate. By his early teens Eddie was playing trombone and guitar professionally in the Durham Brothers Band, with his brother and two cousins; by about twenty he was a member of perhaps the seminal Southwestern jazz band of the era, Walter Page’s Blue Devils. Durham serves as guitarist/trombonist/arranger not only for the Blue Devils, but also for their next incarnation, Bennie Moten’s orchestra, and their next incarnation, the Count Basie band.

Given this pedigree, and the fact that he worked with a constellation of artists that included Cab Calloway, Jimmie Lunceford, Andy Kirk, Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, Harry James, and Billie Holiday, Durham was, along with Sy Oliver, probably one of the two most important arrangers in all of Southwestern swing. Among the well-known titles he either arranged or composed were “Moten Swing,” “Topsy,” “Lunceford Special,” “Harlem Shout,” “Swingin’ the Blues,” “Lafayette,” “Good Morning Blues,” “One O’Clock Jump,” “Jumpin’ at the Woodside,” and “In The Mood.”

Southwestern swing, based in Kansas City in the thirties, was usually riff-based and a good deal more bluesy than its East Coast counterpart. Gunther Schuller (author of the books *Early Jazz* and *The Swing Era*) contrasts Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins as quintessential exponents of the respective styles. He claims that whereas the East Coast-based Hawkins (and his followers) developed a vertical style of playing, following chord changes strictly, Young and his followers phrased “horizontally,” with long, fluid, vocal-inflected phrases that overlapped changes, facilitating a more rolling, uninterrupted groove.

This is an important point, because Kansas City jazz carried forward the rhythmic/ emotional content of the blues into the R&B era (roughly early-forties through mid-fifties), and thus into rock ‘n’ roll vocals. Fittingly enough, Durham pops up in L.A. in the early fifties (where an astounding number of Southwestern jazz and blues artists wound up) as bandleader for Wynomie Harris— a disciple of Turner and the man credited with perhaps the first rock ‘n’ roll song: “Good Rockin’ Tonight” (1947).

Durham, who is credited by some historians with actually inventing riff-based jazz, is thus a key figure in the evolution of twentieth-century music.

But that’s not all: Durham was also a major electric-guitar innovator, both technically and artistically. If not actually the inventor of the electric guitar (its provenance is still clouded), Durham can at least claim to be among a handful of true pioneers. He began to experiment with his acoustic guitar as early as 1929, enhancing its volume with an affixed pie pan. “It was about the size of a breakfast plate. When you’d hit those strings, the pie pan would ring and shoot out the sound. I’d also use a megaphone with it.” Durham also played a National steel guitar (with a resonator) through a microphone at live shows.

His historic solo on the Lunceford Band’s “Hittin’ the Bottle” (September 1935) was played with a pickup-equipped acoustic guitar through a low-watt amp. Leonard Feather identified it as “the first recorded example of any form of guitar amplification.” “DrArmond came out with a pickup, which I got,” Durham recalled, “but they didn’t have any sound amplifiers. So I’d get any kind of amp I could find and sit it on the corner of the stage and run a cord to the guitar, and that was it. And if we were playing in a big auditorium, I’d go directly into the sound system. You couldn’t play rhythm like that because it was too loud. I used to blow the lights in a lot of places. I’d just play solo work, and I think that at the time I was the only guy playing that kind of guitar in jazz.”

It’s fair to say that without Eddie Durham, there would be no Charlie Christian. According to Eddie himself, when he met banjo— and ukulele-player Floyd Smith on the 1937 Basie tour, “He wanted to play like me, but he didn’t have a guitar, and his mama wouldn’t buy him one... he came to me and asked me to say to his mother, ‘Mrs. Smith, this boy could be a genius on the guitar if you’d just buy him one.’ After I did that, he got his first guitar.” Two years later, when Smith was precluded from joining Benny Goodman’s band by his contract with Andy Kirk, he recommended Christian in his place.

Durham first encountered Christian on the same tour: “We met in an Oklahoma City pool hall... Charlie was only playing a little piano then. He wasn’t playing guitar yet. He asked me to give him some pointers, like what to do if you want to play with class and get through life with the instrument. He wanted to know technical things, like how to pick a certain way. So I showed him the way to sound like I did. I said ‘Don’t ever use an upstroke, which makes a tag-a-tag-a-tag sound; use a downstroke. It takes an awful fast wrist to play a downstroke— it gives a staccato sound, with no legato, and you sound like a horn.”

Maddeningly, mainstream accounts of the era often ignore these contributions completely. Thus, NPR’s music website: “In the late 1930s, guitar pioneers Floyd Smith and Charlie Christian brought the electric guitar into the jazz world, and redefined the role of the guitar in the swing orchestra ensemble.”

Here is the key to Durham’s guitar style: He was trying to duplicate the phrasing of a trombone, both by amplifying it (widening its tone and enhancing its sustain) and playing with uncharacteristic intervals and

attack. In these respects he is remarkably similar to another overlooked great from the same era, Bob Dunn, who played amplified steel guitar for Milton Brown.

Both played as if they were discovering the wonders of a brand-new vocabulary at every moment, and in a sense they were. Guitar clichés were yet to be born, so there was nothing to get in their way. Listening to Durham and Dunn (and others from the same era, like Lonnie Johnson, Blind Blake, and Django Reinhart) can restore one’s faith in an instrument that has so often fallen into the wrong hands (axes of evil?). It’s also a reminder that categories like “jazz,” “country,” “rock,” and “R&B” are best used with extreme caution.

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RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



THINKING ABOUT COMMUNISM: *Fundamental Principles of Communist Production and Distribution: A New Look at an Old Text **

by Charles Reeve

DEC 18-JAN 19 | FIELD NOTES

After the strikes and demonstrations of 1921 in Germany, the revolutionary movement that had begun in 1919 ebbed, gradually depriving revolutionaries of space for collective action. Isolated, they were reduced to reflection and propaganda. After 1924, it was clear to these people that the social-democratic and bolshevik approach, to nationalize the means of production, led to a state-run form of capitalism.



THEODORE DARST & COLLIN LEITCH: *Not Every Place You Fit In Is Where You Belong*

by Ida Pruitt

MAY 2018 | ARTSEEN

A bone that Collin Leitch carved from soapstone—*Linger at the edge of the woods for a fixed amount of time* (2018)—rests horizontally on a wall in front of two vinyl-printed video stills.



Shifting and Symmetry of Time

by George Widener

JUL-AUG 2018 | CRITICS PAGE

Although my investigations and conceptions of time are certainly self-taught and personal, they are not necessarily outside the canon of human experience or destiny. They're in fact juxtaposed to the future evolution of technology and human neurological development. This is to say that perhaps one day some of my pictures will awaken from their present hibernation. The question here is whether my calendric calculations and reference points are merely personal or whether they're connected to a futuristic synergized public.

INCONVERSATION



Time-Trails and Travelled Roads: GALE RENEE WALDEN with Rod Kessler

DEC 17-JAN 18 | BOOKS

In her recently released *Where the Time Goes*, Illinois poet Gale Renee Walden moves the reader in various ways, including along the time-line.

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