

Essay No. 1:

I HAD A "EUREKA!" "Watson-Come-Here-I-Need-You" moment with King Oliver on Monday night - (You know him - big guy, fish-eye, moody, plays the cornet, and HOW). Well, I finally found the right-sized needle for his epochal 1923 Gennett records.

Don't laugh. This is a big deal. You could say, with conviction, that these Gennetts are the most important records in the history of jazz. They are the ones that wound the spring of hot music, and sent it on its merry way. They're the first series of records by a major black jazz band from New Orleans, thirty-seven sides, all told. They are Louis Armstrong's first records. Johnny Dodds' too. And of course, Oliver's. They are unadulterated, pure and intense.

This Gennett session is the first of the series, from April, 1923. Musicians and transfer engineers have been trying to decode these records for nearly a century. They've been re-issued countless times. They don't give up their secrets easily. Many an epithet has been hurled their way: "Primitive!" "Unbalanced!" "Noisy!" But people keep playing them anyhow, because, well, after all, they're the most important records in the history of jazz.

So I experimented with them again last Monday. I made sure they were spinning at the right speed, tuned to my A=440 piano. I very carefully centered them, making certain there was no lateral motion of the groove system on each side. Then I chose a needle. It was an odd choice, one I hadn't used before: a 1.5-mil truncated elliptical diamond. That's an outlandish, VERY narrow size for 78s. To my astonishment, it fit the groove PERFECTLY. Suddenly I could hear everything, clear down to the floorboards! Suddenly, that 1923 recording room with Oliver, Louis, Dodds, and everybody came into sharp focus.

Whoa! Let me catch my breath.

Back in the 1920s, every record company had its own, individual, proprietary way of doing things. Nothing was standardized until the era of LPs. Every label's product had different sized grooves, ran at differing speeds, and dealt with the sound everywhich way. It's a real Tower of Babel. The job of a 78 transfer engineer, therefore, is one of TRANSLATION. He assumes the engineers in 1923 knew exactly what they were doing. So HIS job is to transparently and faithfully present their work, translating it into today's technology.

That's what I've done here, with these legendary Gennett records. Familiar as they are, I still really wasn't ready for them. I was sucker-punched and gobsmacked by the sheer impact of King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. That new needle was the key!

Bill Johnson rightly should be heard on his normal instrument, the string bass. But because of the limitations of acoustical recording, he switched to banjo. Too bad, since he always kicked royal ass on bass. If the band sounds a bit topheavy, that is why.

GROK, if you will, Joe Oliver's powerful cornet solo - three blues choruses - on "Dipper Mouth." He's a juggernaut, solid muscle, invincible, SCARY - fully entitled to the adjective "Awesome." Remember, he was standing nearly at the back wall of the the studio, fully thirty feet from the recording horn.

Essay No. 2:

KING OLIVER'S CREOLE JAZZ BAND – the Nine Gennetts

BRINGING BACK live sounds in the Way-Back Machine is my racket! I got busy this week, and completed work on the nine Gennett sides from April 5th and 6th, 1923, by King Oliver's Creole Jazz Band. I had laid down the raw tracks a couple weeks ago, when I first posted three sides. Now, here are the nine, all in a group. These are my own copies, the cleanest of these rarities I've managed to collect up to now. They are not "Marty-Alexander-Worthy" mint specimens – they're merely serviceable, none better than "E," none worse than V+. But heard as a group, they're not bad. Quite good, in fact!

NOW there's SPACE between the instruments. And definition, too. Finally, you really can hear the rhythm section. Lil Hardin's piano, at last, is completely audible, and she's kicking ASS the whole time, supplying much more than "boom-chuck" accompaniment. Lil plays cross-rhythms and sometimes a flat-out, "clavé," "Spanish Tinge" backup that contrasts well with the band. She plays "tall" piano – to make up for the lack of string bass and a full drum kit. Her playing is impassioned, copasetic, neat, accurate and wholly on-point. She throws her full, tiny, four-foot-eleven frame into the fray, really leaning into the instrument, making a big sound, playing HARD with these take-no-prisoners gents. I think now would be a good time to re-assess her skills, these having been dissed and dismissed by generations of so-called "critics."

Drummer Baby Dodds does yeoman work, despite being restricted to woodblocks and cymbal. His rhythm is spicy, incisive and definitive. Another big reveal is Bill Johnson on six-string banjo. Now heard throughout the sides, and despite the cruel handicap of not playing his bass, Johnson is still holding up his end, playing the contrasting steady beat against the often "out" rhythms coming from the piano. [Ezra Wickenmeyer, chief recording engineer for Gennett, imposed these restrictions on the unsuspecting Oliver band. Ezra's main concern was that the cutting stylus did not get bounced off the wax by errant noises. For the same reason, he also banished Oliver and Armstrong to the rear of the studio, fully thirty feet from the recording horn].

Johnny Dodds on clarinet, solos outstandingly on many of the sides, sounding like a Pterodactyl in attack mode. Honore Dutrey has great moments, mostly in "breaks," on trombone, too.

You finally get a close look at the musical relationship between King Oliver and Louis Armstrong. Mostly, Oliver is very much in front, decisively leading the band from his cornet. On second cornet, Louis sounds farther away, always deferential to Oliver, being a "good boy" - but now, close listening shows him counterpointing, harmonizing and doubling Oliver, and also filling "holes" wherever they are. Louis steps closer to the recording horn to solo twice (his earliest on record), on "Chimes Blues" and "Froggie

Moore." I had always thought these early solos were hesitant or embryonic, but BOY was I wrong! Louis plays as smartly and definitively as he would on any later records.

SO NOW you finally can savor the "Gestalt," the in-your-face, densely textured, collectively-improvised TOTALITY of this amazing band, for a whole twenty-five minute set. Kick back in your chair, have a leisurely smoke and a flask of "hooch." It's as close as you'll ever get to sitting at a ringside table at Lincoln Gardens, with Tesch, Bix, Hoagy, Mezz and Krupa. As Hoagy exclaimed later, "WHY isn't the WHOLE WORLD here to see this??"

THE PROGRAMME:

1. I'm Going Away to Wear You Off My Mind
2. Canal Street Blues
3. Just Gone
4. Froggie Moore
5. Mandy Lee Blues
6. Chimes Blues
7. Weather Bird Rag
8. Dipper Mouth Blues
9. Snake Rag

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