

Thomas Vaughn recorded and toured with a number of west coast blues artists - notably Johnny Fuller and Cool Papa Sadler. Dan Kochakian tracked him down through contact with Earl 'Good Rockin' Brown. Here Thomas tells Dan his story.



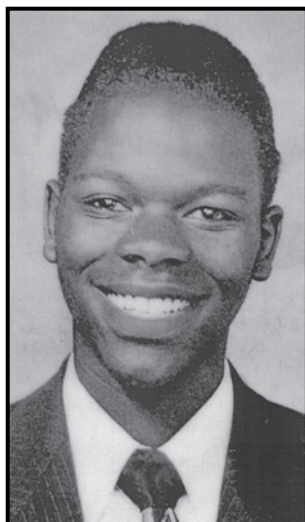
Thomas Vaughn, West Oakland, 1943. Courtesy of Thomas Vaughn.

'CALIFORNIA PIANO MAN'

The Thomas Vaughn Story

By Dan Kochakian

My full name is Thomas Wilson Vaughn and I was born on 7th July 1929, in New Orleans, Louisiana. My parents were the Reverend Thomas Vaughn and Juanita Vaughn. They had one of those pianos with the roller in it and a pedal and I used to pump it. I had a good ear and could listen to a song on the radio and run back to the piano and play it. My father and mother didn't play the piano. My father was a minister and I couldn't play unless he was gone. The first time he heard me play, he thought it was the radio. He told my sisters, 'You tell that boy to turn that radio off in there.'



Thomas Vaughn, McClymonds High School, 1945. Courtesy Thomas Vaughn.

When I was young, my family moved to Oakland, California. I loved the piano and listened to Albert Ammons, Pete Johnson and Errol Garner whenever I could. I picked up the jazz music from Garner and it helped me later when I played in Vegas where I had to play all kinds of styles. I didn't own too many records - I listened to the radio. They had blues stations here in the Oakland area like KWBR. That was the station that played all the blues. That's what I listened to all the time and I picked out songs and learned them. That's how I got started, listening to that stuff.

When I was a teenager, I was going to the Prescott Elementary - Junior High School in Oakland and was in the acappella group. I was fourteen and used to play the piano and the teacher caught me one time and recommended me for the talent show.

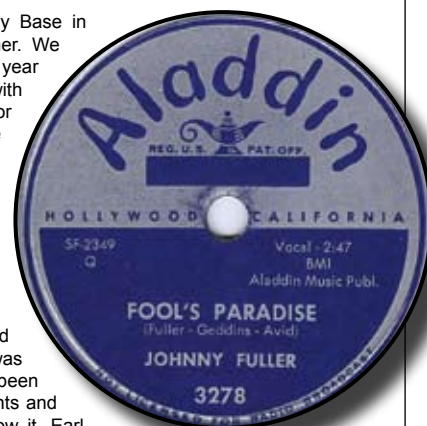
During that time, they gave war bonds as prizes. They had a \$50 war bond and a \$25 war bond, so I took a second place and got the \$25 bond and then I was off and running with the other kids playing boogie woogie.

When I got to McClymonds High School, I got into the marching band, but I was playing saxophone for three years. My father wouldn't buy me a horn, so I went back to the piano after three years of playing the sax. After the marching band, I was in a sextet that the school used for assemblies and we arranged a group outside of the school called The Bopaneers.

We had Billy Brown and Wakefield Taylor on trumpets, John Handy and Alfred Franklin on alto saxes, James Davis on tenor sax, and David Thomas on drums. John Handy was a teacher at San Francisco State College and Hayward State College. He was the first jazz teacher in the Bay Area. We used Myrtle Coella as our vocalist. She sang like Sarah Vaughan. Myrtle changed her name to Mickey Lynn and she sings at all the Playboy Clubs in the United States. We played at the school and also at the Alameda County Country Fair.

We played the Fort Ort Army Base in Monterey for the whole summer. We stayed together for our senior year in high school. I then played with Lovey Lovejoy. He was a tenor player and was a Tuskegee graduate. I got drafted in 1950 and went into the Army. I got out in 1952 and started with Johnny Fuller. I played with him for six or seven months. I was playing with Johnny when I left to play with Earl 'Good Rockin' Brown in 1955.

Earl and Ray Charles had left Lowell Fulson and Earl was forming his own band. He had been coming through on Sunday nights and listened to me and I didn't know it. Earl was picking a band to go to Vegas and when he came to my house, he told me he'd been watching me at the club. I knew who Earl was



From the Dan Kochakian Collection



Thomas Vaughn at the piano, rest unknown, Germany, 1952. Courtesy Thomas Vaughn.



Haskell 'Cool Papa' Sadler, 1980s courtesy Thomas Vaughn.

playing that horn and Billie said: "I gotta have him". She took Earl to The Strip and then went to Chicago, so I had the group and I brought it back to California and in two weeks, Earl sent for me and told me to bring the group back to Vegas and we were off and running again. Earl didn't get to play enough with Billie, so he wanted the band back together. It wasn't about the money. It was about the playing for him. We played a lot of different places. I was the only member of the band who stayed with Earl all the time.

We changed groups a lot of times and travelled out of Vegas and went to Richmond and the Bay area where we backed up Lowell Fulson.

Another Earl Brown group I was in had Duke Sheraton on bass. We all called him Pee Wee. I went to the radio station KRE in Berkeley where Earl Brown recorded for Kappa and I was also at the Sierra Sounds Studio in Berkeley where I recorded some tracks with Grant Watson, a tenor player. Watson had been playing with Johnny Taylor. I also recorded with Earl Brown, but I don't know if any of those tracks were ever released. When I left Earl in 1962, I went back with Johnny Fuller, but only stayed with him for about three weeks.

I also played with the blues guitar player Haskell 'Cool Papa' Sadler. I went back home to California because my father had a heart attack and I was the only son in the family. I had ten sisters! I met up with Rico Jacquez who played guitar and we went to Stockton and played The Little Hut for a year, a whole year at the same club! Reedy Williams was our vocalist in this group, too. He sang on the Ray Charles country & western album. We played Modesto and those towns in that area. With Reedy, we even played country & western stuff.

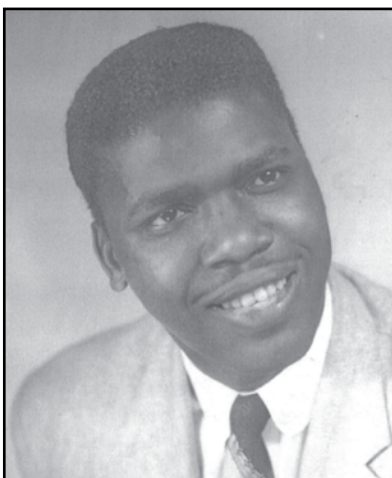
We brought Cool Papa Sadler from Las Vegas to California and then he went to Denver and came back to California. I played with him after I was with Earl Brown, so this would have been the mid 1960s. Other musicians I played with in the Bay Area in the 1960s were L.C. 'Good Rockin' Robinson, J.J. Malone, Sonny Rhodes and again with Lovey Lovejoy.

I had a nice career playing with some very talented musicians. I travelled around and now I'm enjoying life and my family in my retirement.

Many thanks to Anzuree Hill, Mr Vaughn's niece, for making the publication of this story possible.



Thomas Vaughn at the Continental Club, West Oakland, 1959. Courtesy Thomas Vaughn.



Johnny Fuller, from the Dan Kochakian Collection.

because he had that record, 'Lonesome Christmas', with Lowell Fulson.

That song had a lot of saxophone in it. That first year, I'd never been so busy in my life. I was with Johnny Fuller when his record was just getting popular. I am on 'Fool's Paradise' (cut in San Francisco, 1954) and Fuller also recorded 'Haunted House'. 'Haunted House', they used to play on Dick Clark's American Bandstand. I remember playing 'Haunted House' in the recording studio, but the record didn't come out until 1958 or so. I think Johnny got another group to record that song again, so I don't think I'm on the released version. Bob Geddins recorded Johnny, and his

son, Bobby, Jr., is an organ player. I believe he's in Hawaii now.

I took off with Earl Brown and was with him from 1955 to 1962. Billie Holiday heard Earl at The Town Tavern in Vegas. That club had a round bandstand and he jumped from the bandstand to the bar and put his foot down on a stool



Label shots courtesy Victor Pearlin