This article discusses some seemingly random sessions in Pete Johnson's and some others' discographies. Listening to a couple of recent Ace CDs and reading the liner notes left some r&b and boogie musicians and fans puzzled. Who is playing the piano? When were the recordings done? Which sessions do the selections belong to? There is evidence that suggests a different pianist and session order than stated in the notes and in 'The Blues Discography 1943-1970'.

These minor errors are the exception in the generally high-quality liner notes for 'Blues For Dootsie' (Ace CDCHD 1115) and 'Further Mellow Cats 'n' Kittens' (Ace CDCHD 1322). Am I too pedantic about a few false details? Well, we're talking about Pete Johnson, Jay McShann, Hadda Brooks and Lloyd Glenn not getting their full share of credit. What I thought would become a short letter to B&R with comments on the above mentioned Ace CDs amounted to an in-depth reinvestigation that sheds new light on various sessions for small labels in the late 1940s.

Re-establishing Kermit

Pete Johnson is well known as one of the Big Three of Boogie Woogie. He played and recorded extensively on the East Coast as a soloist, duetting with Albert Ammons or playing with Big Joe Turner and others. When the boogie craze faded he made at least two trips to California. On the West Coast he got chances to play and record again for independent labels such as Modern. Its owners, the Bihari brothers, even seem to have known his real name.

A record was released by one P.K. Johnson, standing for Pete Kermit Johnson. Amazingly, many blues fans are not aware that Pete was born Kermit Holden Johnson.

Two tracks by the underrated Kansas City-born blues shouter Duke Henderson on 'Further Mellow Cat's 'n' Kittens: Hot R&B And Cool Blues 1946-1951' (Ace CDCHD 1322), prompted this research. Based on aural evidence it became clear that Jay McShann isn't the pianist on 'Trouble In Mind' and 'In The Evening' as claimed in the standard discographies and repeated by Tony Rounce in his copious liner notes – it's Pete Johnson. Listeners who don't play piano may be surprised that apparently nobody has noticed before. However, it takes a key figure of the current boogie woogie renaissance like Axel Zwingenberger to come to grips with the differences between their styles. He could probably play every Pete Johnson note in his sleep and he performed and recorded with Jay McShann, Lloyd Glenn and lots of the other pioneers of blues and boogie piano as well as Big Joe Turner.

When asked to help he examined the titles closely and replied: 'From the first notes it becomes evident, that it's Pete Johnson on the piano. His solos on the Henderson tracks are typical, in fact, they are especially nice examples of Pete's piano art. If in doubt, compare with other recordings by Pete from that time. His solo in 'Evening' reminds me of his playing on 'Nobody In Mind' by Big Joe Turner, recorded on 6th November 1947 for Aladdin. All due respect to Jay, but he couldn't have played such solos. He was better at other styles.'

Axel added: 'In my opinion both Henderson tracks were recorded at the same time as 'Hard Luck, Women And Strife' from 'Blues For Dootsie' (Ace CDCHD 1115), credited to Pete Johnson's All Stars with Big Duke. And I would suggest that the P.K. Johnson recordings also belong to the same recording session.'

Axel's view is supported by previously available discographic information about matrix numbers, session personnel, details of recording or record release. I'm aware that matrix numbers are often unreliable, but in this case they fit perfectly: MM 879 and 880 for the Henderson songs, MM 882 and 883 for Pete Johnson's 'Sunset Romp' and 'Johnson's Boogie Woogie'. Personally I would argue that leaves MM 881 for 'Hard Luck, Women And Strife', but I won't press the point. I also wonder how trustworthy the names for the session personnel are? Tony Rounce suggests that Teddy Bunn played his 'barely audible guitar' when there is clearly no guitar present. But probably the remaining back-up musicians were playing on all titles. A few comments on the recording date. Rolph Fairchild and Hans J. Maurer suggested circa 1947 in 'The Pete Johnson Story'. They presumably thought that the second AFM recording strike, which began on 1st January 1948 and lasted through 14th December 1948, had made recording sessions almost impossible.

More recently published discographies stating 1948 could well depend on the fact that certain non-union producers and/or studios kept on working, Trumpeter, band leader, A&R man for MGM, and producer Walter 'Dootsie' Williams must have been one of those independent producers. The recording date for his session with Big Joe Turner seems to be established as 28th October 1948.

I wonder if Dootsie Williams was responsible for more of the sessions made in the late 1940s, releasing the results on his own labels or peddling some to bigger labels such as Modern.

A few more comments on that label's policy of re-using stuff with various overdubs and re-titlings: Pete Johnson's two instrumentals were used under several disguises. It's well known among boogie fans that 'Sunset Romp' was called 'Swingin' The Boogie' on Crown CLP 5058. With a tenor sax plus rather inappropriate drums overdubbed. In 1949 it became 'High Tower Drive' on a Modern record. So it came as a surprise when there was another version included with Ace CDCHD 1322, this time called 'Sunset Romp' and also overdubbed. We have to believe Ace that there are two test pressings in their vaults. But what was used on Ace CDCHD 1322 isn't another take of 'Sunset Romp'. Instead it's an alternate take of the overdubbed version, and should thus be re-named 'High Tower Drive (alt. take)'.

A comparison of the two overdubbed versions by Swiss r&b researcher, record-compiler and musician Daniel Gugolz reveals that the doctoring was apparently made at the same time. In a thorough process of listening to a vast number of rhythm and blues records featuring tenor sax players he concluded that sax player Lorenzo 'Buddy' Floyd was the one chosen for this session.

Duke Henderson & Orchestra (Modern 20-632); Pete Johnson All Stars (vocal by Big Duke) (Dootone 302); P.K. Johnson (Modern 20-631); Pete Johnson (Crown CLP 5058); Sylvester C. 'Big Duke' Henderson (-1); Pete Johnson-p; Bill Cooper-b; Albert C. Al 'Cake' Wichard-d.

Los Angeles, poss. 1948.

MM 879-1 Trouble In Mind -1 Modern 20-632*
Big Joe Turner, from the film ‘Shake Rattle And Rock’ 1956. Courtesy Billy Vera.

Hadda Brooks
Ace CDCHD 1322 contains another mystery selection, which was found on an uncredited acetate. It’s a guitar-led jam called ‘In The Oven’ and credited to ‘Teddy Bunn with Hootie McShann Trio’ on the CD. It certainly is by Teddy Bunn with Al ‘Cake’ Wichard on drums. There wasn’t a bass player involved and the pianist doesn’t sound at all like Jay McShann or Pete Johnson. Okay, then, who was it? Axel Zwingenberger compared the track with other piano led recordings on Modern from the same time: “It’s neither Jay nor Pete on the piano. I found a solution while listening to Hadda Brooks’ ‘Honky Tonk Boogie’. It’s very likely her playing the piano. It sounds like a rehearsal for one of her sessions that could well have taken place at the time of the Henderson-Johnson session.”

Hadda Brooks Trio
Hattie Hopgood-p; Teddy Bunn-g; Al ‘Cake’ Wichard-d.
Los Angeles, unknown date, poss. 1947 or 1948, prob. at the time as the Henderson-Johnson session?

In The Oven
Modern unissued
Ace CDCHD 1322

This untitled and unrecorded finding was found in Ace’s vaults of Modern recordings. Title was perhaps assigned by Ace, wrongly credited to ‘Teddy Bunn with the Hootie McShann Trio’ on the CD. The pianist is aurally identified as Hadda Brooks by Axel Zwingenberger. Bunn and Wichard belonged to her combo since 1945. There’s no bass.

The very last correction for ‘Mellow Cats ’n’ Kittens’ comes again from Daniel Gugolz. He ascertained that tracks five and seven (by Three Bits Of Jive) contain previously unissued alternate versions of the originally issued 78s.

Blues Jubilee 1947

What I have tried to do so far is find substantiated answers to a number of questions that provide us with new information about Pete Johnson’s West Coast activities. While preparing this text I listened to many recordings closely related to Johnson’s sessions.

One particularly interesting event raises further questions. I’m talking about Gene Norman’s ‘Just Jazz Concert’ from 27th December 1947 featuring Big Joe Turner, Pete Johnson and Kay Starr. In their article ‘In Search Of Gene Norman’ in B&R 15, Tony Burke and Dave Penny point out that most or all parts of the shows were broadcast live by Norman’s radio station and recorded for possible use by the Armed Forces Network.

But Gene Norman also used to lease these recordings to record labels. Gene Norman began staging jazz singers and groups in early 1947. He soon featured a number of rhythm and blues stars in a second series of concerts, combining locals with visiting musicians. Among the ones to appear on stage were the above mentioned. Boogie fans will be familiar with most of the music from the 1947 concert. When Ace re-released it on their album ‘Steppin’ Out’ by Big Joe Turner on Ace CHD 243 in 1988 including all stage announcements by the MC (probably Norman himself) the place of the show (Civic Auditorium in Pasadena) and the correct sequence of the artists was established: Big Joe Turner, Kay Starr and Pete Johnson. Perhaps other jazz acts followed, as Johnny Mercer’s name is mentioned.

But one point should be made: I don’t believe that Big Joe and Pete or Gene Norman would use different backing bands at the same show. This is what the discographies would lead us to believe: Turner’s group consisted of Pete Johnson, Barney Kessel (g), Harry Babasin (b) and Don Lamond (d); whereas Johnson had Johnny Rodgers (g), Johnny Parker (b) and Roy Milton (d). The first are East Coast jazz musicians, the second belonged to Roy Milton’s Solid Senders. Kay Starr was backed by an unknown different pianist, guitar, bass and drums. One of Germany’s best traditional boogie--woogie pianists, Joerg Henderson-Johnson-session?"
styling of Barney Kessel. Barney Kessel was called upon to participate in the ‘Just Jazz’ concerts numerous times during the year. Possibly the most memorable was held at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium on 4th August. This was the day a Lionel Hampton led ‘Just Jazz All Stars’, which included Kessel, played a mind boggling version of ‘Stardust’ to a delighted crowd. Other Barney Kessel highlights of 1947 include an exercise called ‘From Dixieland To Bop’, recorded with a group fronted by reedman Lucky Thompson and housing Benny Carter as sideman.’

It has already been stated that the Bihari Brothers, owners of Modern Records, were regular customers for Gene Norman’s recordings. They released Big Joe Turner’s recordings, but it seems the records weren’t hits. When Turner re-entered the charts in 1949 with some recordings for Houston’s Freedom label (leased to Specialty) and in 1951 with his first Atlantic smash ‘Chains Of Love’, Modern and Doootsie Williams reissued their Joe Turner stuff, often with overdubs and new titles. When I tried to figure out which recordings had undergone this treatment a few surprises occurred. Fellow collector Daniel Koelzer sent me a few recordings from a Japanese CD, called ‘Barrelhouse and Rockin’ Blues 1950s’, (P-Vine PCD 3059) containing stuff from the show listed below.

According to its liner notes P-Vine used RPM 331, but there is much louder noise from the audience. This is puzzling, since on RPM 331 Big Joe’s explicit lines already elicited roars of approval from the audience, and it’s not clear why it was thought necessary to overdub even more applause.

‘From Frank Bull And Gene Norman’s Blues Jubilee’
Joe Turner v with Pete Johnson-p; Barney Kessel-g; Harry Babasin-b; Don Lamond-d. With original stage announcements, probably by Gene Norman. Live from a ‘Just Jazz’ Concert at Civic Auditorium, Pasadena, California, 27th December 1947.

MM 1627 Roll ‘Em Boys (I Got A Gal) RPM 331 Crown CLP 5227, CLP 5383; United LP 7794; Jackson LP 1207 (G) Ace CHD 243 (E)*

MM 1628 Kansas City Blues RPM 331 Kansas City Blues (same as MM 1628) Crown CLP 5002, CLP 5011, CLP 5383; Amazon LP 1008; Jackson LP 1207 (G) Ace LP CHD 243 (E)

MM 1746 Riding Blues (Jockey Blues) RPM 345; Jackson LP 1207 (G); Ace CHD 243 (E)*

MM 1747 Playful Baby RPM 345; Jackson LP 1207 (G) Ace CHD 243 (E)

*Incomplete on Ace CHD 243, containing only the finishing 110 seconds

Same as MM 1627, but re-released with ts overdubbed by Maxwell Davis.

MM 1113-3A Don’t Talk Me To Death (I Ain’t Not Ready To Die) Modern 20-691; Jackson LP 1207 (G) (Rev. Modern 20-691 by Pete Johnson.)

From above concert reissued on P-Vine PCD 3059 in Japan:
Same details as before, with slightly different retitling and additional audience noise overdubbed.

MM 1627 Roll ‘Em Pete P-Vine PCD 3059 (J)
MM 1628 Been To Kansas City P-Vine PCD 3059 (J)

Kay Starr
v with unknown p; Barney Kessel-g; Harry Babasin-b; Don Lamond-d. With original stage announcements, probably by Gene Norman. Same date and location.

Garbage Man Blues Modern unissued; Ace CHD 243 (E)

Pete Johnson
p with Barney Kessel-g; Harry Babasin-b; Don Lamond-d. Same date and location.

JJX6-88 Yancey Special Jazz Selection 659 (F)
JJX6-89 J. J. Boogie (Just Jazz Boogie)
JJX6-90 Swanee River Boogie Jazz Selection 660 (F)
JJX6-91 St. Louis Boogie Boogie Jazz Selection 660 (F)

Above taken from AFRS-Jubilee 301; 88 also on AFRS-Jubilee 271. 88, 89 and 90 reissued on Ace CHD 243 (E) with 89 retitled ‘Pete’s Boogie Special’ and original stage announcement on 91. All titles also on Storyville CD 8025 (DK), with original stage announcement on 91, prob. by Gene Norman. These titles without announcements reissued on Classics CD 1110.
Lloyd Glenn

A further track on the Japanese CD at first seemed to be another mystery. It is untitled and credited to Pete Johnson. Daniel Gugolz quickly pointed out that it is ‘Jumpin’ With Lloyd’ by Lloyd Glenn and an all star band with Maxwell Davis, another track re-released by Modern with overdubbed audience noise. This even misled Tony Burke and Dave Penny, who filed it under Gene Norman’s recordings in the discography that accompanied their article. It was originally recorded during a Gene Phillips studio session on 21st November 1947.

Lloyd Glenn & His All Stars or Maxwell Davis All Stars featuring Lloyd Glenn; Lloyd Glenn-p; Maxwell Davis-ts; unknown tp, as, bs; Gene Phillips-g; Bill Davis-b; Al Wichard-d.

Los Angeles, 21 November 1947.

*Gene Phillips & His Rhythm Aces, reissued as by Lloyd Glenn All Stars featuring Maxwell Davis or as by Maxwell Davis on RPM 332.

Gene Phillips-g; unknown tp; as; bs; Lloyd Glenn-p; Bill Davis-b; Al Wichard-d.

Los Angeles, 20th October 1947.

MM 762-3 Jumpin’ With Lloyd RPM 332
MM 691-2 New Flying Home* Modern 20-614, RPM 332

On 762-3 a piano is scarcely audible. The audience noise was overdubbed for re-release on RPM 332 in 1951. This title was reissued on P-Vine PCD 3059 (J) as ‘Untitled Instrumental’, with incorrect credits to ‘Pete Johnson acc. by Unknown Saxes and Trumpets’ and a possible recording date of 27th December 1947, i.e. for ‘Gene Norman’s Blues Jubilee’. Both titles also reissued on Classics CD 5016 with incomplete session-details.

While talking about Lloyd Glenn I’d like to add that Axel Zwingenberger solved another puzzle regarding the name of the pianist at a Big Joe Turner session for National on 9th December 1947 in Chicago. Axel played Lloyd the four selections when he recorded with him in Hollywood in May 1981. After listening Glenn confirmed that it was him.

Ace Records have been treating fans and collectors to hefty doses of excellent blues piano music. I hope they contemplate a release of the complete 1947 live recordings including the three unissued ones by Pete Johnson recorded circa January 1949. However, can I suggest Ace compilers carefully listen to the records before reproducing previously available info in CD liner notes.

What’s left to say? I really feel sorry for Jay McShann, but, of course, he’s well served with lots of music genuinely by him on other CDs. Oh, just one last mystery for today. There is a Big Joe Turner release listed in Nick Tosche’s book (1984) ‘Unsung Heroes Of Rock ‘n’ Roll’ (page 257): ‘When I’m Gone’/’No, There Ain’t No News Today’ (Dootone 341, June 1954). Is it a re-issue taken from the October 1948 session? Can anyone confirm this?

Credits

Some titles on the following albums and CDs raised several issues that were critically examined resulting in this revised discography:


Many thanks to all the nice people at Ace Records. Without your work we wouldn’t even have a chance to discuss rare or previously unknown recordings. Long may the stream of music flood from your vaults!


The following provided me with most of the new data to establish a hopefully accurate survey of some previously not so well known work of Pete Johnson on the West Coast in the late 1940s: Axel Zwingenberger and Joerg Hegemann, who furnished invaluable information. Also Daniel Koelzer for comparing tracks and reissues and to Daniel Gugolz, who first identified Pete Johnson as the pianist on Duke Henderson’s Modern record when he received a tape recording of a very battered copy from an Australian collector in 2009. Last but not least I thank Roger Brown and Chris Smith for their help with the proof-reading.

Of course, I’m solely responsible for any mistakes and errors. This is a work still in progress. I appreciate any corrections, comments or additions. Gerd Wieben, Edewecht, Germany email: gerd.wieben@ewetel.net