

The Willene Barton Story

By Dan Kochakian



Willene Barton, left with unknown drummer and organ player, circa mid-1950s. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.

We all have our favourite sax players in the worlds of r&b and jazz. Illinois Jacquet, Arnett Cobb and Big Jay McNeely blasted their horns – as did David ‘Bashful Bubber’ Brooks and Willis ‘Gator Tail’ Jackson. But have any readers paid much attention to female horn players? Vi Redd of the International Sweethearts Of Rhythm and Evelyn Young of B.B. King’s band in the 1950s? They could blow the roof off a club with their powerful horn blast! Willene Barton was of particular interest to me for her gorgeous tone, so let’s take a look at this pioneering female sax player.

Willene was born in Oscilla, Georgia, on 21st October 1928, and grew up appreciating music. Her family moved to New York City when she was ten years old and she was self-taught, playing music into her later teenage years at Manhattan High School. After graduation, she studied with Walter ‘Foots’ Thomas – who recorded for Joe Davis’s Beacon and Celebrity labels, and who had played with Cab Calloway. She also learned from Eddie Durham who then had an all-female group called The Darlings Of Rhythm. Eddie was also the musical director of the International Sweethearts Of Rhythm for a time. Durham remarked that Willene had a tone like Ben Webster, Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins. Eddie arranged for Willene to play a gig with him on guitar, Buddy Tate on tenor sax, Panama Francis on drums and Frank ‘Fat Man’ Humphries on trumpet, and it wasn’t until years later that she realised she had performed with legendary musicians. Willene worked on her breath control to gain power so that her sound would be more full.

She was fortunate to witness the Sweethearts in all their glory at the Apollo Theatre on several occasions while she was in high school. She was immediately impressed with tenor sax players Vi Burnside and Peggy Becheers. In 1948, Willene met the Sweethearts’ then musical director Maurice King whose group, The Wolverines, backed Bea Baker, aka LaVern Baker, on several of her earliest recordings on Okeh. King auditioned her at The Hotel Theresa and while he was aware of her raw talent, he didn’t hire her for the group.

But Willene wasn’t discouraged and started her professional career in 1951, but never had the opportunity to play with the International Sweethearts because they had disbanded by that time. Vi Burnside made a big name for herself in the Sweethearts and later formed her own band that debuted at The Baby Grand in Harlem. Willene joined an all-female band called The Coronians and played in the area of Queens, New York.

Willene did play with several of the Sweethearts’ alumnae through the 1950s. In 1952, she auditioned for Anna Mae Winburn in a studio on 111th Street in Spanish Harlem. Even though Willene was an adult, at twenty years of age at the time, Anna Mae said that she would discuss Willene joining the band with Willene’s mother. Anna Mae received permission after promising to look after Willene. Willene packed up and

joined the former Sweethearts’ leader who formed a twelve-piece band for a show tour that starred Peg Leg Bates and a singer, a comedian and dance troupe.

Willene had seen Peg Leg perform at Radio City Music Hall and was surprised to learn that she would be in the backing band. Willene, who played fourth tenor, didn’t solo very often. She was the only member of the band who did not have extensive professional experience. Willene told Kay D. Ray, in preparation for the film, ‘Lady Be Good – Instrumental Women In Jazz’, that she was: “terrified all the time” as she was “dumped” right in the middle of the band and “had to catch on” immediately.

Willene said that Anna Mae “was all business” and was a strict leader. Willene learned throughout the tour from the professionals in the band and became proficient on her horn. Anna Mae reduced this band from twelve pieces to Maxine Fields on trumpet, Eloise Thompson on alto, Willene on tenor sax, Lorraine ‘Jazz’ Walsh on piano; Eileen Chance on bass; Pauline Braddy on drums and Anna Mae on vocals. Willene recalled playing through the south, and Kentucky, in particular.

When the group played the Ebony Lounge in Cleveland, Vi Burnside was in the crowd and asked Willene if she could play her horn. Willene agreed and watched and listened in amazement as Vi stirred the audience to a frenzy. The following week, Willene visited Gleason’s where Vi let Willene play her horn. Willene impressed the crowd and found her horn stuffed with money. Even with this great acceptance, Willene knew she wasn’t in Vi’s league; Vi called Willene “that little child.” Anna Mae’s group toured the USA, sometimes staying on the road for six months at a time. Willene was with this band for about six years.

Willene then formed a group with Myrtle Young, ex-tenor player from the Sweethearts, that lasted until 1955. In this group were Hettie Smith on drums, who became a politician in Buffalo; Gloria Bell on bass, who married George Coleman, sax player with Lionel Hampton, and Regina Albright on piano. They played at the swanky Crawford Grill Number Two and at The Pine Room of the Parker House (formerly the Granville Hotel) in Pittsburgh.

Shortly after that, Willene started her own group called The Four Jewels with Regina Albright on piano; Gloria Bell on bass/vocals and Hettie Smith on drums. In mid-November, 1954, *The Pittsburgh Courier* called The Jewels ‘one of the hottest all-girl combos...who score on every date’. The Four Jewels played a successful stint at the Stage Lounge in Chicago before embarking on a cross-country tour

It was difficult for female musicians to be taken seriously until they proved themselves adept musically. Willene recalled in an interview that she was constantly told that she had to have an act. She countered that her act was her sax playing and that she didn’t tell stories or perform a comedy routine. At that time, the highest praise for a female artist was to be told that she played like a man! Yoko Suzuki of the University of

Pittsburgh analysed Willene Barton as a specific case study of women in jazz. She noted that while black newspapers of the 1950s described her 'feminine beauty and heterosexual attractiveness', male musicians whom Suzuki interviewed described Barton 'as a strong "dyke" saxophonist'.

Perhaps male musicians saw the talented Barton as a threat and thus sought to denigrate her and her accomplishments. In the film, 'Lady Be Good – Instrumental Women In Jazz', Willene said that skepticism of females playing good jazz was always evident and that when "you go into the clubs with your horn, they would look at you and as soon as you get up on the stage, the women would sort of look at you – 'Oh, my God! Don't embarrass us'. And then when you started to play, then everybody seemed to enjoy it. The women would smile. 'Oh, see that! Women can do that!'" Willene quickly proved herself and went from novelty to respected jazzwoman.

During this period, Willene became friendly with Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis who managed her for a short time. In New York City, Barton played with many of the stellar male tenor players of the day, including Illinois Jacquet, Ben Webster, Sonny Stitt and Gene Ammons. Not only did they sit in with her group for a few numbers, but she was welcome to join their bands whenever she visited the clubs where they appeared. Willene was excited to meet the musicians and singers whose records she had owned as a youngster. Willene described 7th Avenue as "a heavy place for all entertainers. One night, you may see Sarah Vaughan come in or you may see Sammy Davis or you may see Ray Charles."



Myrtle Young and Her Rays, 1953. Gloria Bell, bass; Hetty Smith, drums; Regina Albright, piano; Willene Barton, tenor sax; Myrtle Young, clapping in the Pine Room in the Parker House, formerly the Granville Hotel. Copyright, 2004, Carnegie Museum Of Art, Pittsburgh, Heinz Family Fund, Charles 'Teenie' Harris Archive.



Myrtle Young and Her Rays, 1953. Gloria Bell, bass; Hetty Smith, drums; Regina Albright, piano; Willene Barton, tenor sax; Myrtle Young, tenor sax. Pine Room at the Parker House, formerly the Granville Hotel. Copyright, 2004, Carnegie Museum Of Art, Pittsburgh, Heinz Family Fund, Charles 'Teenie' Harris Archive.

Willene met Charlie Parker in a club on 135th Street. He asked her if she was playing a matinee the next day and then asked her permission to play with her group. Parker walked out, but didn't return. Willene never saw him again.

After The Four Jewels disbanded, Willene formed a group in 1956 with two male musicians, Gildo Mahones on piano and George Tucker on bass. They played at Connie's Inn, an integrated club located across the street from Small's Paradise (7th Avenue near 135th Street) in New

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From the Chicago Defender, 17th September 1955. Courtesy Franz Hoffmann Collection.

York City. The New York Amsterdam News listed Mahones on piano, with Bruce Lawrence on bass and Kallii Madi on drums accompanying Willene at The Shalimar where the paper said she was 'whaling' away on her tenor sax. This band played clubs in New York, Detroit, Buffalo, and Chicago.

Once this trio disbanded, Willene joined organist Dayton Selby whose roots were in Cincinnati. Selby had played the club scene in Brooklyn and the duo played intermittently for about six years, into the early 1960s. In early 1957, Barton and Selby jumped on the 'Honky Tonk' bandwagon started by Bill Doggett and recorded their version for RCA Victor which they called 'Tonky Honk'.

A four-track EP was recorded with a picture sleeve of teenagers, (white, of course), dancing in the studio. Barton and Selby were backed by bass and drums. RCA received strong interest in the group which played a four week stint at the Tiajuana Club in Baltimore. The Hammond organ had taken on a new role as a lead instrument in nightclub gigs fronting saxes and rhythm instruments. Garnering appeal in the early 1950s were stalwarts Doc Bagby, Milt Buckner and Bill Doggett, but lesser-known musicians such as Selby, Pete Martin, Howard Whaley, Ike Reid, and Austin (Michelle) Mitchell also benefited.

The Dayton Selby Trio featuring Willene Barton also recorded a full length album on Cincinnati-based Gateway Records called 'Thar She Blows'. This album isn't another forgettable lounge music platter, but a showcase for Willene whose full Ben Webster-styled tones change to all-out rocking. 'Little Brown Jug', a ditty that goes back to the big band days, gets a full reworking in a jumping Willis Jackson-styled sax honk-fest.

Other numbers feature Selby and Barton battling in a straightforward competition on exciting r&b jumpers. Twelve of the thirteen numbers on 'Thar She Blows' were reissued as 'The Feminine Sax' on Design Records – a division of the budget label Pickwick Records of New York.

Two tracks from 'Thar She Blows'/'The Feminine Sax' were bizarrely released as by 'The Magic Fingers Of Merlin And His Trio —The Swinging Hi-Fi Organ' and was released on Bravo LP K-126. Bravo was a budget label from Long Island and boasted such 'hot talent' as Jan Hubati And His Gypsy Orchestra, Pedro and His Amigos and Hap O'Hallihan. 'Seven Eleven' and 'Barton's Blues' were changed to 'Snake Eyes' and 'Vincent's Last Stand'. Merlin's real name was Van Talbert.

Selby also recorded one 45 for ABC-Paramount in 1959 and at least four singles for the A-F label in the 1960s; one disc on this label I have heard is a straight gospel coupling. Selby also featured on 'The Rocking Tenor Sax Of Eddie Chamblee' on Prestige LP-7321 and backed Ronnie Underwood on a Prestige single in March, 1965.

Willene gained a measure of notoriety via *Jet* magazine that revealed in June, 1958, that she had been married to Baltimore police officer Creston Weingiest, Jr., for six months. Apparently Willene never revealed her secret, even to fellow musicians. In late, 1959, *Jet* asked about the big car that Willene was seen driving. Continuing her confidential nature, Willene would only reveal that her 'sponsor' was a nice man she had met in Baltimore who thought that she shouldn't wear out her shoe leather!

In the spring of 1959, Barton filed an annulment suit against the officer of the law because she claimed that he was married at the time of their wedding.

In 1958, Barton joined Melba Smith who traveled to Bermuda with her all girl band and took the island by storm. The girls' music was enjoyed by actor Sidney Poitier who hit it big with 'Raisin In The Sun' and who frequented the Shalimar Café to see the band. Also during this time, Willene rehearsed with Elsie Smith, another excellent tenor player, and



The Dayton Selby Trio: Eddie Chamblee, tenor sax; Dayton Selby, piano, Al Griffin, drums. Late 1950s. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.

the two formed a band that lasted into late 1960. Smith had played with Lionel Hampton's orchestra from 1952 to 1953 and then recorded with Hamp in 1958, but got married and moved to Queens where she worked with Willene.

Barton was able to record one single under her own name for the Newark-based Sky-Mac label under the direction of pianist/arranger Robert Banks who was involved with the New Jersey scene throughout the 1950s and 1960s. The 'A' side, 'Rice Pudding', was a tribute to Booker T and The MG's huge 1962 hit, 'Green Onions', but instead of an organ lead, Willene paves the way with some powerful horn work. The flip side, 'Bossa Nova Twist', is exactly what its name implies, a bouncy sax led Latin dance number. Her second single for Sky-Mac is an uptempo reworking of the popular hit, 'Walking My Baby Back Home' backed by Willene's plaintive deep-toned sax version of 'As Long As He Needs Me' from the musical 'Oliver'. Even though Barton saw decent success with Selby and others, she became disillusioned with the rock 'n' roll juggernaut of the 1960s and took a day job and only played occasional gigs in the New York City area.

Willene occasionally worked with The Jazz Sisters at east coast clubs in the 1970s and appeared at The Kool Jazz Festival at Carnegie Hall on 4th July, 1981. Willene recalled that about twenty years earlier, she was in the mezzanine watching one of her idols, Illinois Jacquet, play on the Carnegie Hall stage and that she stood where he played. It took a while, but Cobi Narita, the director of the Universal Jazz Coalition, enticed Willene to perform more frequently and formed a band for Willene to lead.

This group may have included Bertha Hope on piano; Lucille Dixon on bass; Nydia Mata on percussion and Bernadine Warren on drums. Barton was pleased to be appreciated by the new audiences who enjoyed her jazz stylings.

In New York City, Willene played with trombonist Al Grey in January, 1982, and at The Village Gate with Gloria Coleman on piano and Bernadine Warren on drums in a Jazz Revue with several male musicians.

Willene was a featured musician at the International Jazz Festival in Bern in 1983. In mid-1984, Willene Barton and The Universal Jazz Coalition

Jazzwomen played a free gig in New York's Central Park and Willene toured Europe with singer Sandra Reeves Phillips, played with her group at the Citicorp Market, Chase Manhattan Plaza and at The Jazz Gallery in the early to mid-1980s.

John S. Wilson of The New York Times wrote high praise for Willene when

she was a member of The Big Swing, a six piece band that played at The Aspen Club on West 20th Street. Wilson described Barton as providing 'a strong solo voice in the big-toned Coleman Hawkins-Chu Berry tradition' on such numbers as Paul Williams' r&b hit 'The Hucklebuck' and a fast-paced version of 'Sweet Georgia Brown'. Willene performed as late as 1993 with the Big Apple Jazzwomen with r&b pianist/leader Sarah McLawler for gigs in the New York area.

Willene decided to retire due to health problems and also because, as she told Kay D. Ray, she "never wanted to be an old lady with a double chin playing the saxophone." Willene passed away on 27th September 2005 in the New York area; she had retired to Flushing.

Willene Barton could honk with the best of them and was able to coax sweet notes from her horn, but sadly, she won't be remembered in the league of male saxophone players. With excellent performances preserved on wax, we'll be able to hear Willene Barton, 'that little child', honking and blasting her sax as a seasoned professional!

Sources:

Special thanks to Kay D. Ray whose generosity in providing her video interview with Willene Barton is most appreciated. For anyone interested in Kay's excellent DVD 'Lady Be Good – Instrumental Women In Jazz' – Produced, Written and Directed by Kay D. Ray, 2007 (Kay D. Ray Productions), contact Kay at kaydray@comcast.net

'American Women In Jazz – 1900 To The Present – Their Words, Lives and Music' by Sally Placksin (Wideview Books, 1982).

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Thanks to Eric LeBlanc and Susan Fleet for research assistance.

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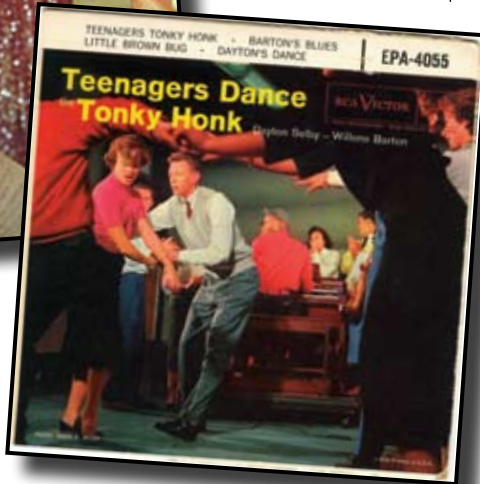
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Willene Barton Discography

By Dan Kochakian



Dayton Selby Trio Featuring Willene Barton

Willene Barton, ts; Dayton Selby, organ; unk. others - 'Thar She Blows'
Cincinnati, Ohio, 1956

Day By Day	Gateway ?
Too Close For Comfort	-
Blues #2	-
Blues #1	-
Little Brown Jug	-
Dayton's Dance	-
I'll Never Stop Loving You	-
Blues #3	-
Seven Eleven	-
Breaking The Blues	-
Blue Moon	-
In The Still Of The Night	-
Barton's Blues	-

Above LP reissued as 'There She Blows' on Hollywood LPH-15
Hollywood was a New York City label, an affiliate of Paramount Enterprises.

Dayton Selby - Willene Barton

Dayton Selby, organ, & Willene Barton, ts; unk. bass; dms
'Teenagers Dance The Tonky Honk'
New York, July, 1957

Teenagers Tonky Honk	RCA Victor EPA 4055
Barton's Blues	-
Little Brown Bug	-
Dayton's Dance	-

'Little Brown Bug' and 'Teenagers Tonky Honk' also released as a 45rpm disc
and same takes are probably included in LP listed below:

'Teenagers Dance' - The Kids, vcl*; Dayton Selby, organ; Willene
Barton, ts; Jimmy Sedlar, vcl**

Hop-A-Do*	RCA Victor LPM-1540
Keep Walkin' (Sweet Talkin' Baby)**	-
My Happiness Is You*	-
Teenagers Honky Tonk	-
You'll Remember Me*	-
Dayton's Dance	-
Little Brown Bug	-
Don't Talk To My Friends**	-

You Never Had It So Good**	-
Barton's Blues	-
Smile At Me*	-
Little Ellie Jean**	-

"The Feminine Sax - Rock 'n' Rhythms of The Dayton Selby Trio
Featuring Willene Barton"

Willene Barton, ts; Dayton Selby, organ; unknown bass and drums
Brooklyn, NY, 1957

Too Close For Comfort	Design DLP-37
Blues No. 2	-
Blues No. 1	-
Little Brown Jug	-
Dayton's Dance	-
I'll Never Stop Loving You	-
Blues No. 3	-
Seven Eleven	-
Breaking The Blues	-
Blue Moon	-
In The Still Of The Night	-
Barton's Blues	-

Willene Barton

Willene Barton, tenor sax, and Her Trio; unk. gtr; drums; Robert Banks,
arranger/organ
Newark, NJ, c. 1963-64

71	Rice Pudding	Sky-Mac 1001
72	Bossa Nova Twist	-
	Walking My Baby Back Home	Sky-Mac 1009
	As Long As He Needs Me	-



Label shots and album covers From the Dan Kochakian Collection