

# ‘VIDO’S BOOGIE’

## The Vido Musso Story

*By Dan Kochakian*

Vido Musso was described by the *New York Sun* newspaper as ‘the big-toned driving tenor sax, reminiscent of a mad bull with musical instincts’. He is probably not near the top of many *B&R* readers’ lists of favourite rhythm and blues sax players but you should not make the mistake of neglecting this tenor sax man. Vido could blow that horn with the best of them and his thirty-plus years of being a sought-after musician attests to his talents. Musso was able to elicit a full, somewhat harsh tone that could then change into a silky smooth purr. He started out playing and recording in swing and jazz bands but eventually found his way to the Bihari brothers group of labels including Modern, RPM and Crown as well as Bob Geddins’ Trilon label and later recorded for Galaxy and Fantasy.



Vido Musso, 1938. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.

**V**ido Musso was born in Carini, Sicily, on 16th January 1913, and his family moved to the United States in 1920, landing in New York where they lived until settling in Detroit in 1929. Vido’s mother had named him ‘Vito’ but changed it to Vido in America because the former ‘sounded too Mafia’, according to Vido’s daughter, JoAnn Musso. Vido attended Highland Park High school in Detroit. The Mussos then moved to Los Angeles in 1930. Vido gained an instant love of American swing music and started his musical journey by playing the clarinet as a teenager. One humorous aside: we found a notation that Vido was the son of WWII Italian dictator Benito Mussolini and that he shortened his surname to avoid any negative connotation. Mrs. Musso adamantly informed us that her father was not related to the dictator. At one point, Vido did add ‘William’ to his name because he enjoyed being called ‘Billy’. Vido married Rose Mirabella of Detroit in 1933 in Los Angeles.

In 1935 Vido landed a job with Everett Hoagland, a band leader in Los Angeles whose group was based at the Rendezvous Ballroom in Balboa Beach. The piano player in the band at this time was Stan Kenton. When Hoagland retired to Mexico, Musso started his own band in 1936 and settled in at the Mandarin Ballroom in Redondo Beach. Before that, also in 1936, Vido was a member of the Herb Wolf Orchestra and participated in the opening and dedication of the Queen’s Theatre in Honolulu.

When the Benny Goodman band arrived in California, Arthur Rollini, a tenor man with Goodman since 1934, saw Gil Evans and his group with Stan Kenton on piano and Vido Musso sitting in on tenor at a small club in Balboa Beach. Rollini was impressed with Musso’s playing, knew that Benny was looking for a soloist, and told Goodman about him. Benny agreed to let Vido audition with the band during a show at The Palomar Ballroom in LA. They played ‘Honeysuckle Rose’ and Goodman hired Vido after hearing thirteen exciting choruses of skilled tenor playing. During Vido’s audition, the audience was dancing, but when Vido’s solo came, they stopped dancing and paid rapt attention to him. On another occasion, when it was time for the sax section to play together without any accompaniment, Vido stood and began playing. The other sax men looked to Benny who said: “Just let him go”. The next day, while the band learned ‘Minnie The Moocher’s Wedding Day’, Rollini realised that Vido couldn’t read music. Vido studied the music overnight and did a credible job the next day. Even though Musso was unable to read music and never fully learned English, he was able to absorb and learn on the fly, which impressed Goodman. Musso could memorise an arrangement after hearing it only one time.

Benny Goodman’s band then held down a two-month stint at The Palomar Ballroom, starting on 1st July 1936. Musso often sat in with the orchestra when he wasn’t working with his own band. Goodman went to New York City in September 1936, and took Vido with him. The Goodman Orchestra ranked number one in *Metronome Magazine*’s national swing poll. After a successful run at The Congress Hotel in Chicago, Goodman went to New York City and then back across the country in the summer of 1937 to Hollywood to start working on the band’s first movie, ‘The Big Broadcast Of 1937’.

Howard Rumsey, a California bass player who led the Lighthouse All Stars in the 1950s, played with Musso’s band in 1938. Rumsey described Vido as “a master of solfeggio, an ear training practice where you hear anything and can play it note for note”. Rumsey added that Vido “could fake his way through pretty good”.

One amusing story regarding Vido’s lack of English skills comes from bassist and jazz writer Bill Crow who related in his book, ‘Jazz Anecdotes’, that band members often played word games to ease the boredom of long days and nights on buses. One member would offer initials of a bandleader and the rest were asked to guess the name. Vido mentioned E.C., but it being neither Eddie Condon nor Emil Coleman, the guys gave up and asked Vido the answer. Vido’s response? “Ex-avier Cugat”. Crow also recalled that Vido mangled the English language to the delight of his bandmates. On a trip with Harry James, Vido was heard to exclaim, “If somebody don’t open a window on this bus, we’ll get sophisticated!”

Benny had Vido double on sax and clarinet. Crow wrote that Benny Goodman was in the habit of borrowing reeds from his sax section. After taking Vido’s last reed one night, Benny called for a song that required a five clarinet break. Vido told Benny: “I can’t play it”, “Why not?” “No reed”. Benny commanded, “Then fake it”.

One well-known story states that Vido owned a relatively inexpensive clarinet and as a newcomer was expected to disassemble, clean, dry, and store Goodman’s more expensive instrument at the end of gigs. After a while, Vido began replacing the pieces of his own cheap clarinet with pieces of Benny’s until he completely switched all pieces and supposedly, Goodman never noticed the difference.

While Musso may have played clarinet often during live shows, the only references we found that he was recorded playing the clarinet was with pianist Teddy Wilson’s Orchestra on an October 1936 session (accompanying Billie Holiday), and a December 1936, session with

Wilson, accompanying the little-known Midge Williams. A further session behind Holiday came in November 1937 when, playing tenor, he rejoined the Wilson Orchestra.

In the mid 1970s, New England tenor sax player Scott Hamilton worked with Benny, but initially admitted that his reading skills were not excellent. Benny responded "Hell, Vido Musso couldn't even read the newspaper!" Hamilton recalled that Zoot Sims was asked to say something in Italian by an interviewer in Europe and he responded, "Vido Musso!"

Joe 'Flip' Phillips had fun with Vido by pretending that he couldn't hear his saxophone during a show. Flip admitted that Vido was the loudest sax player he ever heard and Vido would experiment with different reeds and mouthpieces to get even more volume. When he'd be satisfied, he'd ask Flip what he thought and Flip would respond: "Not loud enough. I can't really hear it".

English language skills notwithstanding, Vido enhanced his reputation as a solid tenor player while with Goodman, culminating in the driving, forceful horn dynamics of 'Sing, Sing, Sing'. But even before that, Musso was featured in a rousing tenor solo on 'Jam Session' for Victor in November 1936. Gunther Schuller noted in his book, 'The Swing Era', that Vido, Ziggy Elman (tpt), and later, Harry James (tpt) 'brought fresh new ideas' to the Benny Goodman band. However, on a disappointing note, Vido recorded 'How Deep Is The Ocean?' with Goodman in late 1941, but that take was rejected. The song was re-cut (Columbia 36754) in early October, but was not released for another four years. The tempo had been slowed and sixteen bars of the first chorus were cut, including a lovely eight-bar tenor solo by Vido.

When the Goodman orchestra had played The Palomar in Los Angeles, some members caught the Lionel Hampton Orchestra at the Paradise Club after the Goodman show. Benny joined Hampton on stage and on 8th February 1937, Vido and six other members of Goodman's band recorded what apparently is Lionel Hampton's first disc under his own name. Although a relative newcomer, with a limited command of English, Vido Musso appeared in the studio at least 35 times in 1937!

Arthur Rollini wrote of a train trip from Los Angeles to New York City to appear at The Pennsylvania Hotel in 1937. The band members passed the time shooting craps in the train's men's room and Vido was frequently the big winner. When the train stopped in Detroit, Vido packed up, exited the train and said: "See yuz in New York, fellas". He promptly purchased a Buick Roadmaster convertible (or 'convertible' as Vido called it), cruised to the city, and was waiting for the train to arrive in New York City.

When Vido performed with the Goodman Orchestra in New York City, he regularly visited Otto Link, the saxophone mouthpiece manufacturer. Vido enjoyed trying new mouthpieces in the shop and neighbours were well aware when Vido was in town as they could hear Vido's big horn up and down 48th Street! Later in the 1940s, Vido used Selmer saxophones with Rico V5 reeds, which were the top of the line in terms of firmness, thus harder to vibrate.

Vido's muscular blowing required the firmest reed. As 'Sax' Gordon Beadle said, the Rico V5 is the hardest number and "takes a lot of air and gut to push 'em". On the other hand, those preferring a softer tone used a softer reed. Lucky Thompson was known to soak his reeds in whiskey to soften them. Between 1945-49, the Bob Dukoff Company of Hollywood made special mouthpieces for Charlie Ventura and Vido. Dukoff called Vido's 'The VM Special'. Recently, one of these pieces sold on eBay for over \$600!

Just before the Goodman band's famous Carnegie Hall appearance of 16th January 1938 (the first jazz group to play there with tickets sold out weeks in advance at \$2.75 each), Benny replaced Musso with Babe Russin. During

one night at the earlier Pennsylvania Hotel stint, Arthur Rollini noticed that Vido was gone without saying goodbye to anyone.

In the spring of 1938, Vido and his orchestra recorded two dozen tracks in Hollywood for the Keystone Radio Transcription Service. These were a mixture of popular tracks of the day with four singers handling the vocals. Two of the tracks, 'Jig-A-Jive' and 'I've Been A Fool',

were also issued on a 78 on the D&S label (Davis & Schwegler) famous for making the earliest recordings by The King Cole Trio in January, 1939. It is believed that D&S was probably sold to Keystone Records in the early 1940s.

Musso joined Gene Krupa in March, 1938, after Krupa abruptly left Goodman who Krupa felt insulted an audience when he told the dancing fans to 'shut up'. Krupa gathered a full band with Leo Watson (ex-Spirits Of Rhythm) on vocals. Krupa's 'I Know That You Know' was rescued "only by some good solo work by tenorman Vido Musso", according to Irving Kolodin of The New York Sun. Vido was again noted by The New York Sun on Krupa's 'Prelude To A Stomp' where "an excellent solo by Vido Musso" was the highlight.

In October, 1938, Vido left Krupa and formed his own band with Peggy Dale as vocalist, but had a difficult time getting work because of the impending war. Musso's last name was too close to Mussolini's and his personality was brash. Musso and his band played a benefit at the Elks' Auditorium in Los Angeles in early April 1939, and although The Pittsburgh Courier called him 'the king of the tenor players', Vido was also described as 'the ofay Coleman Hawkins', which apparently was a compliment. The California Eagle said that Vido's band was 'one of the finest to be presented on the avenue this year' when the group played the Elks' Dance Hall a month later in a competition with alto man Floyd Turnham's band.

Trumpeter and singer Johnny 'Scat' Davis 'bought' Vido's band, kept all the members, including Vido, and led the band himself. This band broke up because of a clash between Davis and Musso, and most of the musicians went with Musso to travel to New York City. Vido later rejoined Goodman in 1939.

Stan Kenton played piano in Vido's band in the late 1930s before starting his own group in Balboa Beach, California, in 1941. Kenton returned there in October 1966, in a concert with Musso, Maynard Ferguson and Gil Evans, amongst other Kenton alumni, for what became known as 'Balboa Revisited'. Vido also worked with Harry James between 1940 and 1941 and again with Goodman during 1941 and 1942. Jack O'Brian of The Buffalo-Courier Express called Goodman's band 'outstanding', especially Vido Musso 'for tone, imagination and ensemble work'. Stints with Woody Herman between 1942 and 1943 and Tommy Dorsey in 1945 also followed. The James orchestra played at The Dancing Campus of the New York World's Fair in the summer of 1940, and jazz writer George Simon noted the brilliant soloists, Dave Matthews on alto sax and Vido Musso, and Sam Donahue on tenors. In a Metronome article, Simon called the Harry James Orchestra the greatest white swing band in the country. Benny Goodman challenged this claim by appearing in Simon's office, asking: "Do you really think so?"

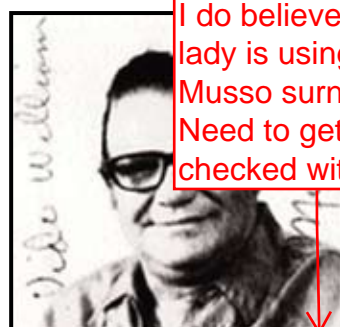
A humorous incident is related in Ean Wood's 'Born To Swing', describing the time that the Harry James band had a tour in Canada in 1941. Since Canada was at war with Italy, band members suggested that Vido tell the border agents that he was born in New York. Vido fell asleep and was awakened by an agent who asked his birthplace. Vido immediately



Vido Musso, 1935. Courtesy JoAnn Musso.



Advert for Otto Links sax mouthpieces, 1941. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.



Vido's USA 'Naturalisation' Photograph, 13th November 1942. Courtesy Jo Ann Sperry.

I do believe this lady is using the Musso surname. Need to get checked with Dan





Vido (2nd left) in The Halls Of Montezuma Marine Corps Band, circa 1944. Courtesy JoAnn Musso.

said, 'Sicily', but added that MCA had "straightened it out so I could come in". The agent asked where MCA was and Vido said to Harry James: "Hey, Harry! This dumb son-of-a-bitch doesn't know what MCA is". Needless to say, Vido didn't accompany the band into Canada.

Vido joined Bunny Berigan in 1941, and then Berigan's health began to fail. Vido had also joined Harry James in 1941. James was known for starring in much of the solo space during recording sessions, but on 'Jeffrie's Blues' (Columbia 36190, April 1941), he blended in with the ensemble while Vido Musso took an extended solo. Vido was well known then and received star billing in an appearance by Harry James and His Orchestra featuring Musso and singer Dick Haymes at The Paramount Theatre in Times Square in early May 1941. Malcolm Johnson of The New York Sun remarked that Harry James 'has some first-rate assistance from the men behind him, especially from Vido Musso, his fine tenor soloist'. The Wilton Bulletin from Connecticut described Vido as 'the wizard of the tenor sax'.

In mid-1941, Coleman Hawkins listed his twelve favourite tenor sax men for Music & Rhythm magazine. He chose Vido Musso as number nine (behind Ben Webster at number one, Lester Young, number three, and Dexter Gordon, number eight), saying that: "Vido Musso has a good tone and plays with the right feeling and expressiveness; he gets directly to the heart of the jazz spirit".

By 1st June 1942, Vido was back with Goodman, but Berigan asked Musso to lead his band and on that same night, 2nd June, Berigan died after a battle with cirrhosis.

In a heart-warming gesture, bandleader Tommy Dorsey added Berigan's name to his band member list, paying Berigan's widow to assist in providing for her two children. Musso's first gig with the Berigan outfit was at Coney Island Park in Cincinnati, but by the time the group reached the Arcadia Ballroom in Brooklyn, it was obvious that some reworking of the charts, and an arranger, were necessary. This was around the time that Musso contemplated changing his name to Buddy Mason, but perhaps realising that even the hep jazz fans wouldn't recognise that name, Vido stayed with Musso. Jo Napoleon, Miss Coney Island and niece of bandleader/trumpet player Phil Napoleon, was in this group, and Andy Blaine, a trumpeter, sang ballads.

Dottie Reid, formerly of Mugsy Spanier's band and Bob Allen's orchestra, joined Vido's group in July and the band performed for two weeks at the Valley Dale in Columbus, Ohio, starting 4th August. Reid didn't stay long and Vido replaced her in late August with Margie Ryan and added Jack Palmer, also a trumpeter, who left the Alvino Ray band and had worked with Harry James.

In late 1942, The Philadelphia Inquirer reported that Vido changed his name to Buddy Mason because "he thought Musso sounded too much like Mussolini". I have not located any recordings under the Buddy Mason moniker. Musso returned to being a band member instead of a leader when he joined Woody Herman's band in late 1942 for a salary of \$200 per week. The Billboard reported that Musso retained his own surname and did not use the new Mason moniker. On 13th November 1942, Vido became a naturalised citizen of the United States. He was living at 3355 Nahatan Way in Las Vegas.

Always on the move, Vido replaced Herbie Fields in Woody Herman's Orchestra at Shea's Buffalo on 1st October 1943, where he joined female trumpet player Billie Rogers (nee Zelda Louise Smith, discovered by Herman in August, 1941) and bassist Chubby Jackson. The band had been featured in the films 'What's Cookin' and Sonja Henie's 'Winter Time'.

At this time, Vido was residing at 7424 Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles. Vido left Woody Herman on 25th April 1944 (replaced by Flip Phillips), and on 12th May 1944, he reported for his induction into the Marine Corps in L.A. after having been given a delay of three to six months. Vido played saxophone in the marine band as a private first class and was given an honourable discharge in San Diego on 16th March 1945, after less than a year in military service. Vido was a member of the Halls of Montezuma Orchestra in the marines and was featured at bond rallies and Red Cross drives, Naval hospitals and U.S.O. events.

Vido's recording sessions took a hiatus in early 1944 and then continue in February, 1945. Musso played in Tommy Dorsey's Orchestra until October 1945, when the band left for the east coast. Musso stayed behind to join Stan Kenton whose star began to rise with a big shot coming later from Vido Musso's stunning tenor playing. Musso became noticed as a result of his beautiful silky notes on 'Come Back To Sorrento' that he recorded with Kenton in June 1946. The liner notes to Kenton's 'Artistry In Rhythm' LP (T167) note that 'Come Back To Sorrento' is 'climaxed by a forceful coda which finds him blowing a stirring concert G above high C, a note that any musician will confirm simply 'ain't on the horn'".

NB: the liner notes make this sound more unusual than it was. Regular fingering on a tenor sax goes up to concert E-flat. To play higher than that, you use 'false fingering' to get the harmonics which are in the altissimo register that is above the normal range of the horn. Fans at Jazz at The Philharmonic concerts heard Illinois Jacquet play such high notes regularly, and the r&b honking style that was developing post-war used it as a staple – Earl Bostic and Wild Bill Moore used the altissimo regularly. It carried over into rock'n'roll and 1960s r&b as well. As an example, Junior Walker in later times played that G all the time. It was his high note and he used it in different keys for different effects.



Advert for Selmer saxophones, 1948. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.



Vido at Jazz At The Phil, circa 1950s, with Lee Young, Benny Goodman, Red Callender, Wardell Gray, and Red Norvo. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.



# BOOGIE WITH VIDO


1938 - 1954



Labels: Dan Kochakian, Bob McGrath, Daniel Gugolz



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Advert for Lockie's, from *Downbeat*, late 1940s. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.

On 'Sorrento', Vido does shine, and although he leads all the way in front of the orchestra, he is only briefly in a true solo spotlight. Kenton was known for his complex and busy arrangements, with many other musicians playing behind the solo instrumentalist. To some tastes, this was a rich, sophisticated arranging style that framed the soloist beautifully. To others, it was unnecessarily 'notey', thus diminishing the soloist's impact. The vibrato and expression that Vido used may have come from his Italian background, much the same way that Sam Butera utilised with Louis Prima.

Harvey Anderson, a bandleader at The Cellar in Fort Worth, recalled that when Kenton's band played The Casino, he invited Kenton and the orchestra to play a game of baseball the next afternoon in Forest Park. Anderson and his teammates were dumbfounded when a line of taxis arrived at the field and Shelly Manne, Vido and the entire band, except for Kenton, exited. They had on full uniforms with gloves, spiked shoes and the 'SK' logo on their hats. Anderson's team lost 20-0.

In 1945, Coleman Hawkins left his stint at The Spotlite Club on West 52nd street in New York City to join Norman Granz's Jazz At The Philharmonic that was to embark on a four-week national tour. West Coast members included Barney Kessel on guitar, Willie Smith on alto sax, Vido and Lucky Thompson on tenors, and Meade Lux Lewis on piano. Joining from the East were Thelonious Monk on piano, Roy Eldridge on trumpet, and Helen Humes as the featured vocalist. The tour began at the Los Angeles Philharmonic Auditorium at 5th and Olive on 26th November 1945, but was curtailed after three weeks due to some venues' managements refusing to sign a non-discrimination/non-segregation clause regarding the audience.

Musso won the *Downbeat* Jazz Poll Award in 1943, 1946, and 1947. In 1947, Musso bested 'Flip' Phillips at number two and Coleman Hawkins at number three! Affirming this stellar showing of Musso's playing was

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Cashbox advert, 17th July, 1948. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.

The *Billboard*'s description of Vido's performance at the Orpheum in L.A. on 15th January 1946; the magazine stated that: 'Vido Musso's tenor saxing of 'Body And Soul' brings down the house'.

As World War II ended, Kenton's sound moved from swing to a more aggressive jazz stance. Vido Musso and Eddie Safranski (who recorded his first solo with Musso's band in February, 1946) played significant roles in one of the band's biggest hits, 'Artistry Jumps'. Musso left Kenton in mid-1946, following a stint at Los Angeles' Million Dollar Theatre, to front his own band. Musso auditioned musicians for a planned fourteen-member orchestra to be ready for one nighters within a month. Capitol Records immediately became interested in Musso's latest venture and smaller companies made tentative offers. In October, 1946, Musso gathered his crew for a run at the Meadowbrook Gardens in Culver City where he played a six-night stint with admission prices at sixty cents and ninety cents on Saturdays. At this time, Vido was the star performer, taking many raucous solos and instantly attracting the younger fans. The rest of the band lacked personality with no individual standouts besides Musso. Vido returned to Kenton in late 1946 after a short-lived career as band leader.

Vido's sound also evolved, from the backing sax arrangements in swing to the jazzier side for Capitol Records, and then for Savoy with 'Moose On A Loose' and 'Moose In A Caboose' in a more rockin' jump blues vein. Kenton's 'Ecuador' on Capitol was a Latin-flavoured number featuring 'Vido Musso's garrulous tenor sax', as mentioned by The *Schenectady Gazette* in August 1949.

In early 1947, Musso recorded with the Kenton orchestra in several more sessions that included popular standards such as 'Lover Man', 'Willow Weep For Me', and 'Cocktails For Two'. In April, Kenton had a nervous breakdown on stage at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa. He broke up the group on 19th April and in a telegram to his booking agency, General Artists Corporation, said that he couldn't go on because he was very ill. GAC had bookings through August for Kenton's orchestra worth about \$150,000 and other bands immediately sought to fill the void. Kenton went on vacation to recuperate and Musso took some band members and a few from former Kenton groups to form a nine-piece band called The Stan Kenton All Stars. The group began an eight-week stint from late May into July at the Panther Room at the Hotel Sherman in Chicago. Members in this band included Kai Winding, Eddie Safranski and Shelly Manne. By mid 1947, Vido was rehearsing a big band, but then dropped that idea to head a six-piece group at Jumptown, a South Side Chicago café.

Vido seriously broke out of the jazz mould with his recordings for Bob Geddings' Trilon label in mid 1947, with his own band rocking 'Vido's Bop', 'Gone With Vido', and 'The Unfinished Boogie'. Most of this band was from the Kenton orchestra, which angered Capitol Records who had the recording contract with Kenton's orchestra, now unfilled due to Kenton's illness. In mid August, Kenton reorganised his band with June Christy on vocals, but Musso left and took the small combo to The Continental Theatre Bar in October.

Vido was involved in Gene Norman's 'Just Jazz' group (Ernie Royal, trumpet; Wardell Gray, tenor sax; Arnold Ross, piano; Barney Kessel, guitar; Don Lamond, drums) who recorded in December 1947. Two 78rpm discs in an album subtitled 'Just Bop' received faint praise from The *Billboard* which described this 'live' session as 'fairly stimulating' in 'working over the standard, 'Just You, Just Me'.' The reviewer did note that the highlight is 'the duel between the contrasting tenor saxes of Wardell Gray and Vido Musso'. *Billboard* believed that the discs of two tenor and two trumpet 'chase choruses' would 'get play in hip' nightclubs.

Joe Arden, a 23-year-old trumpet player, was a member of the quintet known as The Vido Musso All Stars in early 1948. In a story by The *Daily Sentinel* of Rome, New York, Joe related that on 31st December 1947, a day before the AFM second recording ban went into effect, he made several recordings with Musso's group, including the appropriately named 'Beating The Ban'. A coupling called 'Futuristic' and 'Theme To Hollywood' were said to be issued in August 1948, and were featured on jukeboxes in New York earlier in the year because Arden had advance copies or dubs of this disc. I have included this information in the selected discography, but have no information as to actual release date or record label.

In June, 1950, Vido's band was touring in the Hawaiian Islands where bassman Red Callender had been performing and DJ'ing since 1948. Red had starred in many of the JATP sessions and Musso asked him to do some arranging for his group. Vido wanted Red to join his combo, but Callender had performance commitments to honour. After Vido returned to Los Angeles, he sent Red a ticket so he could reconnect with Musso on the mainland. The timing was perfect as Red had fallen into debt and the recording ban had been lifted. Red flew to Los Angeles in June 1950, where he played with and arranged for Musso with Bob Harrington on piano and Bobby White on drums at The York Club at Vermont and Florence. Also in June, Duke Ellington asked Red to join his band, but Red turned this major opportunity down and remained in Los Angeles to play with Musso as well as Charlie Parker, Lester Young and Erroll Garner.



Modern Records started its 33rpm LP series (retailing for \$2.85 each) in October 1950, and albums of earlier top-sellers were released by Vido Musso, Pee Wee Crayton, Jimmy Witherspoon, Gene Phillips, Hadda Brooks, Little Willie Littlefield and Smokey Hogg. Vido went on an eastern U.S. tour in late 1950. As a featured performer, he planned to pick up an outfit to back him rather than take his current band with him. Upon his return, Vido joined Sonny Criss, Hampton Hawes and Jack McVea in backing Jimmy Witherspoon in a concert at the Avadon Ballroom in Los Angeles on 8th December. Musso played with Richard Wyans on piano, Pony Poindexter on sax, Vernon Alley on bass and Roy Porter on drums at the Black Hawk in San Francisco's Tenderloin district, and on New Year's Day, this quintet performed in the dining hall for inmates at San Quentin prison. In his autobiography, 'There And Back', Porter recalled that he occasionally saw men he knew in the audience, including rhythm and blues artist Saunders King, who was locked up for heroin possession. Porter himself became an inmate there in June 1953, when he was arrested for drug possession.

In 1950, Vido was represented by ABC Management and was a staple on the Los Angeles music scene. His band played a minimum of three nights a week at The York Club, a cocktail lounge in Los Angeles during August 1950. Trumpeter Chet Baker played in Musso's band for a time around 1951, after he did a stint with the Sixth Army Band at the Presidio in San Francisco. Vido's fifteen-piece orchestra with Mary Ann McCall on vocals played the Palais Royale, and The Bungalow in Seaside, Oregon, in late May 1951, but by mid year, the orchestra was only achieving indifferent success in the Los Angeles area. McCall left the group after only a few dates and was replaced by ex-Lester Lanin singer Francine Palmer whose first gig with Musso was in Oakland on 23rd May, the first show of a northwest one nighter tour.

Vido and his manager Don Haynes broke their contract with ABC Management and Haynes took over as supervisor manager of The Rendezvous Ballroom in Balboa where he immediately booked Musso's group for two Saturdays, 16th June and 23rd. Vido had disbanded the large group and went with a sextet for his two-week run at the newly-refurbished Oasis at 3801 S. Western in Los Angeles, sharing the evenings with singer Ella Mae Morse who was attempting a comeback as a single after years of big band singing. Vido then traveled with the Los Angeles group for shows in San Francisco starting on 24th September. After Billie Holiday's stint at The Club Alabam at 4215 S. Central Avenue, Vido took a small combo there for an indefinite stay.

Lest we believe that Musso was simply another white big band/swing musician, he had the respect of black singers whom he backed in significant concert venues. On 8th December 1950, Musso backed Jimmy Witherspoon at the Avedon Ballroom with featured instrumentalists Sonny Criss and Jack McVea as well as Witherspoon's band. On 5th May 1951, Associated Booking Corporation signed Vido, and Sarah Vaughan sang with Vido's band during a five-day stint for \$3500 at the Rendezvous Ballroom in Balboa Beach that was sponsored by Gene Norman. The group then played three days at The Oasis beginning 11th June. In late July 1952, at Billy Berg's 5-4 Ballroom, Helen Humes, who had a big rhythm and blues hit with 'Million Dollar Secret', sang with Vido's band that had Milt Burnhart on trombone and Bobby White on drums. Although ABC had access to the Glenn Miller music book and swing style, Vido preferred jump arrangements.

Saul Bihari debuted his new label, Crown Records, in November 1953, and signed sax players Joe Houston, Musso and Lorenzo Holden, and pianist Willard McDaniel. Vido had the first release on the label

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b/w SPEAK FOR YOURSELF, JOHN, by LORD RICHARD BUCKLEY. Hip version of John Alden and Priscilla. HI 302 45 RPM Extended Play.
- 4. TEENAGE CAT** (Rock & Roll) 2 Sides  
Vocal by Hip's new rock and roll discovery, Ricky McDonald, featuring the Great Swinger Vido Musso on tenor sax, with an All-Star Band.  
HI 280 45 RPM Single.

Singles Retail 89¢—EP's Ret. \$1.49.  
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**HIP RECORDS** 6087 Sunset Blvd., Hollywood, Cal.

(Juke Operators and Record Stores: If your local Distributor does not have HIP Records as yet, you may order direct. Singles, 60¢; EP's, \$1.00 prepaid, cash or check with order. Order direct from HIP RECORD SALES, Box 3337, Van Nuys, California.)

From *The Billboard*, 10th November, 1956. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.

with his soothing 'Lullaby' (which is actually Irving Berlin's 'Russian Lullaby') backed by the rousing 'Roseland Boogie'. Crown 110 ('Musso's Boogie'/'Sing, Sing, Sing') assumed the fast-paced style intended for rhythm and blues audiences. The noted rhythm and blues expert Dave Clarke discerned that 'Vido's Boogie', with canned audience applause, is on the 1963 Marvin (Phillips) & Johnny (Emory 'Johnny' Perry) Crown LP (5381) even though the LP lists 'Cherry Pie', one of M&J's biggest hits. Dave initially assumed that this was a Marvin Phillips band track, which was understandable because M&J were both saxophonists who had played in the Richard Lewis band before forming their duo. Dave learned that what he thought was 'Cherry Pie' was actually 'Vido's Boogie' when he heard the Vido Musso LP on Crown CLP5007. The RPM single of 'Vido's Boogie' has canned applause, but to make matters more confusing, the Musso LP has a non-canned applause version that is yet different from the M&J LP track. 'The Swingin'st' (Ace CD 1035) has two versions of 'Vido's Boogie', neither 'live' nor canned, called 'Back Street Boogie'—aka 'Musso's Boogie', and 'Vido's Boogie' which has also been titled 'Rock 'n' Roll Boogie'. The Musso LP version does not have a bass player as do the Ace numbers! On a side note, Dave also learned that 'Vido's Boogie'/'Blue Light' was one of the first early issues on the English London American label released in the U.K. in 1954 (on 78rpm only).

Musso had disbanded his orchestra in September 1951, possibly with the intention of becoming involved in the small combo r&b scene via Crown/Modern/RPM Records. Those years of the 1950s showcased Vido's power with many tenor sax barnstormers, including the rousing LP, 'The Swingin'st' (Modern 1207) from mid 1956. This album was not warmly greeted by a *Billboard* reviewer who called Musso's playing 'coarse and uninventive blowing' much like 'an inferior rhythm and blues honker'. Perhaps the reviewer missed Musso's big band swing style and was not attuned to jump sax rhythm and blues of the era.

The mid 1953 release of 'Vido's Boogie' was described by *The Billboard* as 'a wild instrumental performance of an infectious boogie tune with the leader blowing good sax throughout. The flip side, 'Blue Night', has a pleasant riff with Vido upfront all the way.

Vido's group was very popular in Los Angeles and was often held over at club dates due to 'SRO crowds that refused to let the band off' the stage, according to the *Los Angeles Sentinel*. From 14th-16th March 1952, Musso played the 5-4 Ballroom at 5409 South Broadway in L.A., on the heels of his 'Cooling' which was a solid hit on Los Angeles jukeboxes. The band returned in April to another rousing reception. The weekend of 30th January through 1st February 1953, saw Vido and his Capitol recording sextet back at the 5-4 Ballroom, after returning from a tour of the northwest. Gene Rowland, an ex-Kenton member, played trumpet and sang with Vido's group while Ding Best played bass.

In late 1953, Gene Norman formed his record label Gene Norman Presents that featured songs and instrumentals performed 'live' at his 'Just Jazz' concerts in Los Angeles. Dizzy Gillespie, Gerry Mulligan, Charlie Ventura, and Vido Musso were among the artists whose numbers were released after Norman received clearances because they were under contract to different companies at the time.

Vido Musso, singer Roy Brown, Shorty Rogers and other artists donated their talents to play for a benefit in February 1954, in Seattle organised by the Ben Waller management agency for Stan Getz who was suffering from narcotic poisoning. Getz had married Musso's former singer, Beverly Byrne, in 1946. Vido was recognised by The Los Angeles Sentinel as a style-conscious personality among Louis Jordan, Arthur Lee Simpkins and California heavyweight champ Willie Bean who



From the Dan Kochakian Collection



bought their clothes at Charles, Ltd., in Los Angeles. In May, Vido took the spotlight at Club Capri in Los Angeles, and in late November 1955, played The Loop Lounge in Cleveland.

HIP Records of Sunset Boulevard in Hollywood advertised HIP

Top: Sam Butera, Louis Prima and Vido, Las Vegas, circa late 1950s.

Middle: Eros ERL, 50030-UK cover released in 1961.

Lower: Crown CLP5007 originally issued on Modern LMP 1207 in 1956. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.

280 by Ricky McDonald, its 'new rock and roll discovery', as described in its Billboard advert of 10th November 1956, with accompaniment by Vido Musso on tenor sax and an all-star band. We have no knowledge that this record was ever issued. According to 'The R&B Indies', HIP records was owned by producer/arranger Lyle Griffin and pianist/singer Harry (The Hipster) Gibson. The company released recordings by Gibson, Faye Wilson and the Johnny Otis Orchestra, and three by Lord Richard Buckley.

Frank Sinatra, Musso and Henry Slate, co-owner of the Slate Brothers' Club in Hollywood were on the fringes of a brawl outside of the club in October 1957. Sinatra was at the club with Lauren Bacall to see Don Rickles, and the four of them avoided most of the mayhem, but Ms. Bacall slammed the car door on Musso, cutting his leg, as they sped away.

Charlie Ventura, a fellow tenor man, was scheduled to appear on 'Stars Of Jazz', an August 1958, television show in Los Angeles with trombonist Carl Fontana. The show was hosted by songwriter/singer/piano player Bobby Troup. Ventura was unable to perform, 'due to a bandstand mishap' according to Bob Bernotas, the author of the books 'Top Brass' and 'Reed All About It', concerning brass and reed players in the jazz world. The group, with Margaret Whiting on vocals, began the session (which is captured on Uptown CD 27.61) with a standard blues number and continued with 'Lester Leaps In', the classic jazz number penned by Count Basie. The ensemble sounds confused, and then Musso breaks into a twelve-bar blues form, but reverts to the 32-bar jazz tune. Musso is also featured on the ballad, 'Come Back To Sorrento', for which he gained fame with Stan Kenton in 1946, and the show ends with 'Intermission Riff', another Kenton tune on which Vido played in the 1946 and 1956 versions.

Musso settled in Las Vegas in 1959 in a small apartment with a kitchenette near The Nevada Club in the Golden Nugget Casino where he led the house band for three years, playing 52 weeks a year. Vido's wife, Rose, remained in Los Angeles and visited Vido on weekends, but

after a serious car accident in 1960, she moved to Las Vegas to be with her husband. Vido's two daughters also moved to Vegas. In 1961, Vido and Rose purchased a home in Paradise Palms.

Vido played every hotel on The Strip alongside such popular artists of the day as Louis Prima, Sammy Davis, Jr., Dean Martin, and Frank Sinatra. Prima's sax man/band leader Sam Butera admired Musso because of the sheer power of his playing. Vido had played with Don Rickles at The Slate Brothers nightclub on LaCienega in Los Angeles and Rickles was so impressed by his playing that he asked him to join him in Las Vegas where he opened for Rickles at The Casbar Theatre at The Sahara Hotel in May 1959. He also played The Skylight Room at The Desert Inn and the Rancho Mirage. In December 1961, Elvis Presley performed at The Thunderbird and Elvis and Vido became very good friends and while residing in Las Vegas, Vido's neighbour was sax man Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis.

Vido was teamed with singer Sonny King because both were Italian and they became good friends. The duo regularly played several weeks at a time at The Sahara, followed by four weeks off and then several weeks at The Tropicana. When Frank Sinatra was in town singing at The Sands, Vido and Sonny would finish their gig in the Sands' lounge, which ran from 10pm to 4am, and catch up with Sinatra. Author Michael Archer, in researching his book, 'A Man of His Word: The Life and Times of Nevada's Senator William J. Raggio', learned that Sonny King, who worked with comedian/singer Jimmy Durante, visited Raggio's home in Reno with Durante, often with Vido Musso who was in Durante's band at the time. The senator recalled that: "Vido would cook Italian food and end up using every pot and pan in the kitchen, making a complete mess". In a 1966 interview, Tony Bennett remarked to Johnna Blinn of The Buffalo Courier-Express, that if "you want to have the greatest Italian food, you really should try some of Vido Musso's cooking. You'll never forget it. His pasta is so light, it's beautifully poetic".

Sonny King also worked The Celebrity Room and Bootleggers Bistro in the 1960s. Freddie Bell and The Bellboys replaced King at the latter venue, and his show, Freddie Bell's Open House, featured various performers in a variety review. Bell told Jerry Fink of the Las Vegas Sun that he, Sonny King and Vido Musso "hung together all the time". Vido's combo backed Sonny at The Sands Hotel in September 1964. In 1966 and 1967, Musso also played The Celebrity Room and The Celebrity Theatre with other stars including Count Basie, Sam Butera and The Witnesses, and Louis Prima. Vido made an appearance on 'The Tonight Show' with Johnny Carson on 29th May 1974 and he retired from show business in 1978, and lived in Rancho Mirage – Frank Sinatra resided three blocks away. The two friends could be found spending much time together, planting basil and enjoying Italian food. When Sinatra held parties, he asked Vido and his wife Rose to handle the cooking. Platters of spaghetti and several hundred meatballs were not uncommon requests for these grand events! Although retired, in 1980, Vido enjoyed sitting in with the Ace Hitchinson band at the Riviera Spa Hotel in Palm Springs. Vido Musso, who ended his days in Palm Springs, passed away at Cedars-Sinai Medical Centre of a heart attack after complications of carcinoma

of the lung on 9th January 1982, at the age of 69, in Rancho Mirage, California. Vido Musso was buried in the town he loved, Las Vegas.

**Special thanks to Vido's daughters JoAnn Musso and Marie Greene, Al Basile, Gordon Beadle, Rob Ford, Scott Hamilton, Dave Penny, Doug James and Bob Sunenblick.**

**In researching Musso's recorded legacy he was involved in over 225 recording sessions, an astounding number that stretches the work to many pages, obviously too large for B&R. If you would like to receive the complete discography, or want Vido's recipes for Pasta Ala Musso with meatballs and Italian-flavoured bread crumbs, and Chicken ala Pizza, drop me a line at [dk@csr-bos.com](mailto:dk@csr-bos.com). The discography will also be published on the B&R website.**

Sources: 'The Big Bands' by George T. Simon, Macmillan Company, 1967; The Billboard – various issues; The Brooklyn Eagle; The Buffalo Courier-Express; The California Eagle; First Pressings – The History of Rhythm & Blues; compiled and edited by Galen Gart, Big Nickel Productions, 1990; Howard Rumsey Interview by Steve Trattalone – Jazz Connection, May, 1950; 'Jazz Anecdotes' by Bill Crow, Oxford University Press, 1990; The Pittsburgh Courier; 'The Song of The Hawk' by John Chilton, 1990; 'The Swing Era' by Gunther Schuller, Oxford University Press, 1989; 'Thirty Years With The Big Bands' by Arthur Rollini, University of Illinois Press, 1987; 'Unfinished Dream – The Musical World of Red Callender' by Red Callender and Elaine Cohen, Quartet Books, 1985.