



PORTRAIT OF BILL HARRIS

UP to 1944, the recognised style of jazz trombone playing was more or less uniform, with the possible exception of about four instrumentalists. These four — Jack Teagarden, J. C. Higginbotham, Laurence Brown and Trummie Young — were all easily distinguished from one another, but their differences were only the result of small modifications on the recognised style. Consequently, the general pattern of playing suffered a certain *sameness* and *staleness*. J. C. Higginbotham, on Coleman Hawkins' *Bouncing with Bean* (H.M.V.), gives us a very good example of this particular style.

1944, however, brought a new name to the jazz scene — that of Willard Palmer Harris, playing trombone at the time, with Woody Herman's newly-formed orchestra. His style at that time was yet another interpretation of the recognised style we have mentioned, but although rugged, and raw enough to please any jazz-man, it bore traces of the great *Harris* style that so many trombonists try to emulate to-day. Invigorating, and in a unique way full of personality, it was still in much the same vein as jazz trombone playing had been for the last ten years or more. A completely new style was needed, and Bill Harris was just the man to do it.

HIS EARLY RECORDINGS.

From the advent of Woody Herman's records here on the Parlophone label, Harris's development can be heard more or less accurately. The first discs — *Apple Honey* and *Caldonia* — give us Harris as an orthodox stylist with original ideas, but he was not to remain so orthodox for long. Soon, it became evident that his style was getting more sophisticated, although none the less invigorating or entertaining. Presumably, as his experience lengthened and his proficiency increased, he became dissatisfied with the formula he had hitherto followed more or less closely. He began to temper his forthright "take it or leave it" expression with a certain amount of sentimentality. The old "blue" effect was giving way more to melody in the accepted sense — restrained,

but with an elusive "kick" behind it. Listen to *Wild Root* and the later *Blowin' Up a Storm* for examples of this.

The new Columbia label has given us several records by the Woody Herman Woodchoppers, on which abound a wealth of Harris ideas. His work by no means follows one definite pattern, for his ideas are different on almost every side. The first of the series, *Steps*, is a moderately slow piece, which is more or less a showcase for Herman's clarinet work, but there is still time for a beautiful muted solo by Harris, which, although a trifle dramatic, shows the utmost of genuine jazz feeling. To hear his supreme technique and command of his instrument one only needs to turn over the record. Here is an up-to-date arrangement of an old Herman "special" with Harris playing a really intricate jazz solo without a falter — the tempo being breathtakingly fast. With equal ease he can play soft, but sensational solos with profound conviction. American jazz critic Mike Levin, of the **DOWN BEAT**, described his entrance on *Nero's Conception* as one of the most sensational ever waxed. Certainly it shows how well the trombone can convey emotion when in the right hands.

CAN ALSO PLAY MELODY.

Right now, sweet music seems to be enjoying great popularity both in America and England, and although many jazz musicians are forced to play "commercials" to make a living, few put into their playing of this type of music the feeling they put into their jazz. Harris, on the other hand, can be downright sweet without losing any of his tremendous jazz spirit — for proof of this listen to *Pam*, the partner side to *Nero's Conception*.

One of the most outstanding features of his later playing is the ability to weave an intelligent, well-built melody from his improvisations. Most jazz solos are more or less fragmentary variations either tacked by devious methods on to the theme or constructed on the harmonic and chord changes.

Whilst there must be, and is, continuity, there is no form. Harris, on the other hand, whilst perhaps not fashioning them that way deliberately, makes his solos into intelligible and faultless melodies in their own right, though this does not mean that they are any the less good jazz than any other type of improvisation.

The improvised "melodies" played by Harris, when reduced to their essential composition prove to be almost unbelievably simple in construction and, indeed, under any other guidance than that of Harris they would sound purely *corny*. This, perhaps, explains his sudden, but well-deserved rise to fame. His solo on *Woodchoppers' Ball* contains much of this type of "melody."

WILL HE PLAY BE-BOP ?

When Herman disbanded his outfit in 1946, Harris left to join the Charlie Ventura sextet, and as we have little or no means of hearing this group, his style may have changed considerably. He may even be playing Be-bop, certainly he has the technique and mode of expression to do this.

Harris has developed a fresh outlook on jazz. His ideas, judging from the records issued here, being to play jazz with a maximum of colour. With this new idea, he has also brought an un-matched skill to trombone playing — if he continues to keep up his steady flow of ideas he will lead the field for many years to come.

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