

Scratching the Surface

By Steve Voce



Teagarden – got the amazed ray.

I dip often into Manfred Selchow's superb book *Profoundly Blue*. Edmond Hall was a fine man who very much deserved to have such a book (640 pages) devoted to him. Usually when confronted with discrimination he turned quietly away, but there was one time in particular when he didn't.

Duke Ellington approached Edmond to join his orchestra to replace Barney Bigard, but Ed didn't like the idea of all the travelling and turned him down. Instead he joined the band at Eddie Condon's Club, being the first man to break the club owner Johnny Pesci's strictly whites only band policy.

"Even at Condon's," Ed told John Chilton, "I noticed that I was always being talked to by the police about the way I parked my car, whereas the other guys in the group got away with it."

In 1951 Columbia Pictures was filming a short to feature the untalented Johnny Ray with the band at Condon's. The film producer Harry Foster explained that "if a Negro was to be shown playing the same bandstand with white musicians, movie operators in eight Southern states would refuse to rent the movie." He wanted Hall, a member of the band, to play on the soundtrack and have Peanuts Hucko on camera to mime to what Ed had played. Condon didn't like the idea but agreed to it on the grounds of money. But this time Edmond dug in and called Local 802.

"This whole thing is very unfair to us. It's costing \$1,000 an hour while they sit around and talk," complained Foster.

"Unfair to whom?" asked the dignified clarinetist.

The upshot was that Foster agreed to film two versions, for normal people with and for the South without Edmond Hall. This was a flawed idea because nobody said which version would be used in the final production.

I saw the film at the time, but didn't know all this, of course. Selchow reports that in the issued version Hall was hidden behind the singer Dolores Hawkins.

A year later Columbia filmed Joe Bushkin's quartet with Buck Clayton, Milt Hinton and Jo Jones at the Embers. So maybe Ed's stand was not in vain.

Benny Goodman, for all his faults, never seemed to notice or care about anyone's colour. He was just as nasty to Wardell Gray as he was to Gene Krupa.

His autobiography *The Kingdom Of Swing* (Ungar), written in 1939 with the journalist Irving Kolodin, has inevitably dated pretty badly, but it's still fascinating. Expectedly Benny comes out of it as a nice guy – something that, with hindsight, might not seem to ring quite true for part of the time. However before WWII he seems to have been pretty popular with people like Krupa and Wilson, both later to feel his searing ire, and happily shared an apartment for some time with fellow clarinetist Jimmy Dorsey (who, like Barnet and Thornhill, was to become one of the genuinely nice big bandleaders).

"Jimmy and I both played sax and clarinet and whoever grabbed the phone first got the job ... Unfortunately Jimmy and I couldn't get into the same clothes, but there was plenty of swapping in ties and socks. We didn't care much about this, but it was a different proposition when one of us found a good reed. He'd practically have to sleep with it or else it would be gone the next day."

Returning home from work one New Year's Eve, Benny found Jimmy, who was a sideman in the Ted Lewis band, already in bed.

Benny asked Jimmy why he was home so early. "I hit Lewis on the head with the clarinet," said Jimmy.

"It seems that everybody had a few drinks and was feeling good," wrote Goodman. "Jimmy decided that was a fine time to panic the folks at the club with an imitation of Lewis playing clarinet."

Although Lewis provided a lot of work for various jazz musicians, he wasn't liked and his dreamy and syrupy "Is everybody happy?" catch-phrase drove them mad. Goodman never seemed to care that Lewis was often content to let people think that Goodman's clarinet solos were played by Lewis although amidst the queasy lyrics of *Dip Your Brush In The Sunshine*, there's a coruscating solo by Goodman which Lewis credits with "Paint it blue, Benny!" There's a similar endorsement of Muggsy who has a hot solo and the track is to be found on a very useful Avid compilation (AMSC695) which has 48 tracks featuring the facially challenged cornettist.

Jazz musicians like Dorsey, Goodman and Teagarden seemed to pop in and out of the Lewis band of the early 30s. Amazingly there is today a Ted Lewis museum and Theodore Leopold Friedman went on wearing his battered top hat, ensuring everybody was happy

and playing his Albert system until the late 60s.

Goodman, like the other musicians in New York, was stunned by Teagarden's prowess when he first arrived there. "He was one of my favourite musicians then, and still is today. Although I got about as many kicks out of hearing Jack play as any musician I've ever worked with, he was under the impression for quite a while that I didn't like his playing. The reason for that I suppose is that I was never much of a hand for talking about things I like ... Then too I had the habit of turning round and looking at a fellow kind of amazed if he got off something really unusual while we were on the stand together."

BG Ray Mark 1 perhaps?

It's now common knowledge that Teagarden was originally intended to be the leader of what became the Bob Crosby band. What isn't so well known is that when Benny formed his first band hiring Teagarden was his first priority, but of course by then Jack had been signed up by Paul Whiteman. Whiteman also wanted Goodman and it was only because he didn't like one-nighters that Benny didn't sign. If he had it would have changed the course of jazz history (for the worse!).

Anyway, when he formed his own band Benny used the dependable Red Ballard and, as a Teagarden substitute, Jack Lacey. "He impressed me at the time as the nearest thing to Teagarden I had heard."

Teagarden meanwhile was on good money with Whiteman. He had joined in December 1933 and it was to be December 1938 before he made his escape. Whiteman flatly refused to let Jack shorten the contract. At first there was a small group within the band called The Three Ts (Jack, Charlie and Frank Trumbauer) and when Frank left in 1937 after 10 years with the band, it reassembled as The Swing Wing.

But the chances for jazz solos in the body of Paul's music were few. The band played in New York for 233 performances with nine show girls, 16 dancers, 17 aerial performers, 31 circus acts and almost 500 animals including an elephant called Big Rosie. Whiteman appeared on stage on a large white horse.

Just before Jack left, the band played a Christmas concert at Carnegie Hall and *Downbeat* ran the headline "The Deceased Of Carnegie Hall Turn Over In Their Graves As Jazz Lifts The Roof".