

The
VOCAL
of
HENRY WILLIAMS
“RUBBERLEGS”

Born: Atlanta, July 14, 1907
Died: NYC. Oct. 17, 1962

Introduction:

Nobody will ever be able to forget Rubberlegs Williams after hearing him making the Continental recording session into a great circus! We played those records again and again at our parties back then, still love them.

History:

Became employed as dancer with Bobby Grant's Female Impersonators on 1919. He later won several Cakewalk and Charleston competitions and other dancing contests and achieved success on Vaudeville, going on tours with the Theater Owners Booking Association. He got his nickname "Rubberlegs" because he danced as if he had legs made of rubber. In 1933 he appeared in the short film *Smash Your Luggage*, and appeared in shows like the "Cotton Club Parade" and "Blackbirds of 1933". He was a regular performer at The Cotton Club and the Apollo in Harlem, and at the Southland ballroom in Boston, and according to Count Basie, he became the venue's most prominent attraction with his elaborate dances. He also appeared as a singer with prominent artists such as Count Basie Orchestra, Fletcher Henderson, Chick Webb and Charlie Parker, and sang on the first recording (?) of Dizzy Gillespie's "Hot House" on April 1, 1945 in New York City (ref. Wikipedia, excerpts).

RUBBERLEGS WILLIAMS SOLOGRAPHY

LOVIE AUSTIN & HER SERENADERS

Chi. Aug. 1926

Revised personnel: Possibly Dave Nelson or Shirley Clay (tp), Kid Ory (tb), Johnny Dodds (cl), Lovie Austin (p), Eustern Woodfork (bj), Henry Williams (vo).

Two titles were recorded for Paramount (two more without vocal):

2621-1	Chicago Mess Around	Vocal 24 bars. (SM)
2624-2	Merry Makers Twine	Vocal 32 bars. (M)

Admittedly this is a theory only, but I got the idea of checking whether there was any Henry Williams vocalizing in Tom Lord's discography, and then I found this session. Could he be our Rubberlegs? In 1926, he was 19 years old, thus possible. Then, when I played these two items, I seem to hear faintly some of his tricks, as we learned them many years later, particularly in the second half of the vocals. There must have been quite many young men with that name, but yet my intuition tells me I might have found something hitherto undetected. What is your opinion?

Postscript of June 2016: I have received several mails supporting this idea. With permission I quote David Tenner: Here is one reason I think that you are right about the "Henry Williams" Williams" in the 1926 Lovie Austin records being Rubberlegs Williams. From the autobiography of the drummer Harry Dial, reminiscing about Chicago in the mid-1920s: "We went into the Eldorado Cafe on the South Side. We played there several months. We had a fairly good little show there with six girls in the chorus line; there were three female impersonators starring in the show. It was a fad then for those guys to take the name of some famous movie-queen. There was this guy named Sam something. He was black, six feet tall, and his breasts had developed just like a woman's, and he made plenty of money exhibiting them and allowing the patrons to feel them; he had taken the name of Gloria Swanson. There was another one, I never did know his real name, who had taken the name of Peggy Joyce. And we had Rubber Legs Williams. I didn't mean to call Rubber Legs an impersonator, because he never wore female attire at any time, but there was no doubt about his homosexuality. And there was little Lovie Austin, M.C. and comedian in the show. We had a nice run at the Eldorado. When I say 'nice', I don't mean the length of time, I was referring to the pleasant atmosphere..." Harry Dial, *All this jazz about jazz: the autobiography of Harry Dial* (Storyville Publications 1984), pp. 44-45. Now of course it is possible that in Chicago in the mid-1920s Lovie Austin worked with *both* Rubberlegs and another singer named Henry Williams, but I doubt it. Anyway, the discography for the 1924-26 Chronological Classics Lovie Austin specifically lists "Henry "Rubberlegs" Williams – vocals".

ELMER SNOWDEN

& HIS SMALL PARADISE ORCHESTRA

Brooklyn, N.Y., early 1933

Bigband personnel including Rubberlegs Williams dancing.

Film soundtrack "Smash Your Baggage".

JAM SESSION

NYC. ca. Dec. 23, 1944

Rubberlegs Williams (vo), Stuff Smith (vln) and others ((tb), (ts), (p)).

One title was recorded at Timme Rosenkrantz' apartment:

Am I Blue?	ca. 4:00. (S)
------------	---------------

New information of Feb. 12, 2018: This entry consists of three aborted repetitions, almost like the guys are trying to develop a commercial recording? The first version lasts two minutes and is highly noisy, with fine violin but faint vocal. The second has a brief piano intro (possibly Garner?) and a vocal breakdown after 8 bars. The third manages another 8 bars before breakdown, and the suspicion raised from the very beginning is now fully and 100% confirmed: The vocalist is Rubberlegs Williams, he sounds exactly like on the Clyde Hart session only a few days later, no doubt about it!!!

CLYDE HART's ALL STARS

NYC. Jan. 4, 1945

Dizzy Gillespie (tp), Trummy Young (tb), Charlie Parker (as), Don Byas (ts), Clyde Hart (p), Mike Bryan (g), Al Hall (b), Specs Powell (dm), Rubberlegs Williams (vo).

Four titles were recorded for Continental:

3301	What's The Matter With Me?	Vocal 18, 18 and 18 bars. (M)
3302	I Want Every Bit Of It	Vocal 30 bars. Acc. (as) 8 bars. Vocal 10 bars. (S)

3303	That's The Blues	Vocal 48 bars. (S)
3304	4-F Blues	Vocal 24 and 12 bars. (SM)
3304-alt.	G. I. Blues	As above. (SM)

A fantastic session on the border between swing and bebop, with a personnel out of this world, all getting ample opportunities for magnificent soloing or background playing. Background, oh yes, because Rubberlegs is the boss here. To call his effort singing is an exaggeration and an insult to singers, but vocal it is, and a performance never heard before nor after in a recording studio. You can imagine how excited we were back then as youngsters, listening to the daring lyrics. And how he was presenting them! Quoting Wikipedia here: "During a January 1945 recording session with Continental, he once screeched his way through a session after becoming "wildly disoriented after unwittingly ingesting an enormous dose of Benzedrine", after Charlie Parker spiked his coffee with three tablets". If you are unfamiliar with this session, try "... The Blues" first and then continue to "... Every Bit ...", and you will already know if you are charmed by HRW, like me, or not. Note also two takes of "... Blues", lots of differences, as when he shouts "open up, open up" during Dizzy's chorus on "4-F ..." but not on "G. I. ...". An historical event

OSCAR PETTIFORD & HIS ORCHESTRA **NYC. Jan. 9, 1945**

Dizzy Gillespie, possibly Benny Harris, two unknown (tp), Trummy Young, Benny Morton, two unknown (tb), Johnny Bothwell, unknown (as), Don Byas (ts), possibly Serge Chaloff (bar), Clyde Hart (p), unknown (g), Oscar Pettiford (b), Shelly Manne (dm), Rubberlegs Williams (vo).

Three titles were recorded for Manor (one more without HRW):

1219	Worried Life Blues	Vocal 16 and 16 bars. (S)
1220	Empty Bed Blues Pt 1	Vocal 36 bars. (S)
1221	Empty Bed Blues Pt 2	Vocal 36 bars. (S)

Five days have passed since the previous session, time enough to clean up... Here we meet a personal blues vocalist and entertainer in good shape, no jazz history is created but nice items with fine background playing worth listening to.

**RUBBERLEGS WILLIAMS
WITH HERBIE FIELDS' BAND** **NYC. April 24, 1945**

Miles Davis (tp), Herbie Fields (cl, ts), Teddy Brannon (p), Leonard Gaskin (b), Eddie Nicholson (dm), Rubberlegs Williams (vo).

Four titles were recorded for Savoy:

5805-1	That's The Stuff You Gotta Watch	Vocal 40 and 32 bars. (SM)
5805-2	That's The Stuff You Gotta Watch	As above. (SM)
5805-3	That's The Stuff You Gotta Watch	As above. (SM)
5806	Pointless Mama Blues	Vocal 24 and 24 bars. (SM)
5807	Deep Sea Blues	Vocal 36 and 24 bars. (SM)
5808-1	Bring It On Home (NC)	Vocal 1 bar (NC). (S)
580-2	Bring It On Home	Vocal 24 and 24 bars. (S)
5801-3	Bring It On Home	As above. (S)

HRW is in good shape here, and his vocal efforts are quite acceptable, but the session as such is one great anachronism, and Miles Davis's presence is almost not notable. My favourite items are "Pointless Mama ..." and "Deep Sea ...", but note particularly what is going on with "... Watch"! The two first are 'sung' pretty normally, but on take 3 he starts interfering already in the tenorsax intro, and then changes his vocal to quite another coarse mode, reminding about the Continental session!! So it seems HRW was quite an actor, could simulate a stoned vocalist ... or could that last take be recorded at the end of the session? ...

BILL DE ARANGO **NYC. June 8, 1946**

Unknown (tb), Bill De Arango (g), unknown (p), (b), (dm), Rubberlegs Williams (vo).

Four titles were recorded for Signature/Haven:

845	Goin' Back To Washington	Vocal. (M)
846	Did You Ever Set To Thinkin'	Vocal. (SM)
847	Susie Bee Blues	Vocal. (FM)

848 I Ain't Gonna Marry

Vocal. (M)

This final session is disappointing, rather importunate mouth release filling all items almost to the brim, few qualities in general, except some nice trombone parts, if these had been HRW only recordings, he would certainly not have been legendary!

No further recording sessions.

...ooo...