Mel Bay Fiddle Sessions

Stacy Phillips and Anthony Barnett

Musings on the Evolution of Jazz Violin, &

Electric Violins and Jazz Violinists 1930s–1950s

In 2010 Stacy Phillips and Anthony Barnett conducted a five-part interview for Stacy's *Fiddle Sessions* site at Mel Bay. In 2006 AB contributed a three-part early history of electric violins. When, in 2017, it was discovered that Mel Bay was no longer going to maintain *Fiddle Sessions*, Stacy had plans to repost some of the many contributions at his own site but wonderful Stacy died in 2018. The SP–AB contributions are now posted here, with minor editing, such as where corrected information has come to light. The prompt for doing this now is Matt Holborn interviewing AB in September 2019 for his *Jazz Violin* podcast, which is available at https://jazzviolin.podbean.com/e/episode-20-anthony-barnett/ also at hyperurl.co/htlchm

https://www.newhavenindependent.org/index.php/archives/entry/stacy_phillips_obituary/

Musings on the Evolution of Jazz Violin* is followed by *Electric Violins and Jazz Violinists 1930s–1950s

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Musings on the Evolution of Jazz Violin

Part One, Musings

SP: Comment on the evolving position of violin in the ragtime, early, swing, bebop and current eras of jazz.

AB: First, let me say I am not the knowledgeable person about ragtime and, say, early string bands. Document CDs are a good source of, if not always accurate information, at least the string band music itself. I would also mention the two very useful early blues violin compilation CDs put out by Old Hat (*Folks He Sure Do Pull Some Bow!* and *Violin, Sing The Blues For Me*).

I have written quite a bit about the evolving position of the violin in jazz in the 96 page booklet that accompanies the AB Fable 2CD hidden history of early bebop violin *I Like Be I Like Bop*. Despite the title of this set, the booklet ranges far and wide, much earlier and much later than bop. I have said a little more about the early days in the notes to the anthology CD of swing strings *Professor Visits Harlem*. Then there are Howard Rye's lengthy notes to the 2CD set *Blows 'n' Rhythm*. I would say, study at least these. To say nothing of the journal *Fable Bulletin: Violin Improvisation Studies*. Although it has ceased publication it is available in specialist libraries.

Truly, it would be helpful if those who are interested turned to some of these sources first, helpful, I believe, for them and certainly helpful to AB Fable.

This brings me to a couple of asides. Not infrequently I receive requests for information, from collectors, musicians, researchers, student or otherwise. Much of the time the information sought is already out there, in the CDs, in the books and journal and their online updates. It's not much fun repeating over and over what one has already written or policing ubiquitous errors long ago put right, what I like to call string-along-theories. I guess I should have a web page devoted to some of those. That said, of course, I do not know everything, which is why I have online update pages. The history and an understanding of that history is always evolving. The other aside is that the internet has widened the dissemination of both poor as well as good information and has increased expectations that one can, even must, get something for nothing, i.e. without personal energy and/or financial input.

SP: Are bowed instruments more generally accepted now and considered less of an oddity? It seems that, historically, there have been more improvising violinists in Europe than America. If so, why do you think this is/was true? Is the situation changing?

AB: More generally accepted: that seems to be so, but if you examine the history deeply you find that in, for example, the 1910s and 1920s there were many violinists in jazz, blues and proto-jazz contexts, many of whom were improvising to some extent or other, though many, on the cusp of jazz and dance musics, were not. True, very few rose to the ranks of international renown (preeminent were Eddie South, Joe Venuti, Stuff Smith, Stéphane Grappelli) while for others the violin ended up not being their primary instrument: Darnell Howard, Edgar Sampson, for example. The ubiquitous explanation for the apparent disappearance of violins is provided by Milt Hinton: the introduction of sound movies putting many violinists out of work, as silent movie accompanists.

So, I don't think that historically there have been more improvising violinists in Europe than in America but there clearly is a perception that that must have been so. There may have been more in Europe who achieved some kind of recognition on disc, in particular in their locality. Actually, we are talking about jazz but, if we add western swing and country musics there were many, many improvising violinists in USA in the 1930s and 1940s, who often took their inspiration from Venuti, Smith, or Svend Asmussen. For years, among the Europeans, Grappelli and Asmussen were the most widely known, though there were many others.

Listen to all those other Scandinavian violinists who even produced on disc a body of valid early bebop violin at a time when it appeared that American violinists did not. I say appeared because what else was going on in America that did not find its way on to record or in such obscure contexts that until recently we did not know about them? For example, the excellent unidentified bop violinist on two tracks recorded in Cleveland in the early 1950s [now identified almost certainly as one Jimmy Lane]. If we now have a recovered glimpse of him, who else have we not glimpsed? I have again to point, for example, to the two AB Fable anthologies *I Like Be I Like Bop* and *Blows 'n' Rhythm*, the in-depth annotations that accompany them, in the latter case by Howard Rye and the many recovered recordings therein.

I do want to stress, however, that these are off the cuff remarks, open to different understandings and reconsiderations.

Today there are many post-Ornette Coleman, shall we say, improvisors, both in America and Europe. There often are different sensibilities involved, which need greater consideration.

Part Two, Scratch on Wood

SP: More generally, speak to misunderstandings of jazz violin exhibited by the jazz community and/or violinists.

AB: That is a big question. I am tempted to answer that things are much better but I am often given cause to wonder.

For example, 2009 saw, to my knowledge, three centenary celebrations of Stuff Smith: one in *The Strad* by classical violin guru Tully Potter (in-depth and in many ways excellent), one in *Strings* (largely sounding out other violinists), and an hour on the BBC in which the host, well-known jazz author and broadcaster Alyn Shipton, discussed Smith with a British jazz and session violinist, one whose sympathies lie, almost inevitably, more with Grappelli, Christian Garrick (he's in the soundtrack orchestra of the movie *Chicago*, by the way). All three celebrations repeated the ubiquitous adage that Smith is (often) scratchy. I repeat, what I have long ago said elsewhere, that if Smith is scratchy then so are Roy Eldridge, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster and numerous other Smith peers.

This scratchy critique just does not pass. What is it with the violin? OK. We have a smooth player Eddie South, rather like, say Benny Carter. That's one side of things and we have Stuff Smith, rather like Eldridge, Hawkins, Webster. South the Tolstoy, Smith the Dostoyevski. What is the problem? In fact, while working on the interviews with other violinists for his article in *Strings*, Eric Fine had even put the scratchy point to me over the telephone. I explained the above but to no avail, which may indicate that he is his own man, or not. Far worse, reprehensible, in fact, was the underlying premise of the BBC programme: even when they were speaking about a Smith record they liked, it was as if they were embarrassed and apologetic about liking it, with woeful comments about his technique. And, deliberately, I would say, of all the wonderful material that exists, they chose "It Don't Mean a Thing" from *Violin Summit* to close the programme—a track that, without contextual explanation, for the uninitiated, shows Smith in a very poor light in relation to Asmussen, Grappelli, Ponty, with whom he is playing on it. What a wasted opportunity. But I do believe they wanted that. Nigel Kennedy, whose so-called jazz recordings are a musical disgrace—Blue Note should be ashamed of themselves—used that track to get at Smith in his premature autobiography some years ago, too. Yes, that was it, apologizing not only for themselves but for Smith. Smith needs no apology. Grappelli himself is in print, with patent sincerity, more than once about Smith's greatness. Oh, well, the BBC, contrary to what many may think, has always been iffy.

Of course, it is OK to prefer something to something else. It is OK to prefer Tolstoy to Dostoyevski. I just wonder how many people in the jazz community are willing to say that they do not like Eldridge, Hawkins or Webster. Nor is there any point pointing out below par recordings by Smith as some kind of evidence ("It Don't Mean a Thing", for example). Who does that to Eldridge, Hawkins or Webster? At least not in order to dismiss. There are below par recordings by most everyone, including South and Benny Carter, for a variety of reasons. That is not the substance of the matter.

Well, this is a fairly specific answer to one point about one violinist but it begins to touch on broader matters.

Let me continue a moment more about Stuff Smith. Notwithstanding these remarks, he has always been appreciated where it mattered, as much by violinists as by other instrumentalists and listeners. Both Jean-Luc Ponty and Michal Urbaniak have been at pains to point out in print that, among violinists, it was Smith and no one else who was their prime mover. Western Swing violinists, mainly tend to favor either Venuti or Smith, I believe, although Svend Asmussen figures for some. Recent years have seen quite a few new violinistic jazz tributes to Smith, whether somewhat imitative or explorative. For example, Billy Bang, Sam Bardfeld, Tomoko Omura, Mike Piggott, Michael Fraser, Regina Carter, Billy Taylor with Turtle Island (combined tribute to others including Eddie South and Art Tatum) and many others. I am not making quality judgements with these names. If I were, some might not be there. And there have been non-violinistic tributes too: notably Oliver Lake's pairing of Smith with Rashaan Roland Kirk in a tribute to these two Ohio sons. Excellent. And contemporary non-jazz tributes: notably, one of Steve Reich's *Daniel Variations* is inspired by Smith's 1936 version of "I Hope Gabriel Likes My Music".

Some jazz and impro (a contraction I prefer to improv) violinists, and this goes for Smith himself, have looked to other instruments, horns, percussion, the orchestra itself, to expand their understanding of what can be done tonally and in phrasing with the instrument.

Responses

Tim Woodbridge: Enjoy your articles. I have a nodding acquaintance with jazz violin (Venuti, Smith, Nance and, since your tent seems to cover Western Swing, the major fiddlers of that genre). And I agree with what I take to be your point, that smoothness alone is not the whole story. So if we're talking about "scratchiness" how about Pee Wee Russell and Henry "Red" Allen?

Graham Clark: Anthony Barnett focuses on one thing that I think actually elevates Stuff to greatness, rather than detracting from him, and that is the business of "scratchiness". First, let me quote Nathan Milstein on why he liked the fiddle, "Because you can scccrrraaaatcchh on it!" The scratch and noise that the violin makes is precisely what gives articulation and, combined with proper accentuation and timing, allows the fiddle to swing. None of the post Grappelli-ites have it at all. The scratch is a most important aspect of playing to master, but close miking exaggerates it. A pick up over-amplifies it, so electric players stop using the bow properly. Articulation and swing in singing come from the placing of the consonants. You don't get the groove from the vowels. For a horn, it is the tonguing. For a violin, it is understanding the scratch. It is said that if you were next to Heifetz when he played, all you would hear would be scratch. From a distance, the scratch softens, and the "vowels" come out, but you still get the clarity of articulation. So, I liken the scratch to consonants in speech and I encourage students to explore how that scratch defines their phrasing. It certainly did for Stuff."

Matt Turner: Long live the scratch! I wrote to Anthony shortly after this article debuted, and mentioned that Stuff Smith's playing had and continues to have a huge impact on my jazz playing.

AB: Thank you Tim and Graham – excellent points both – very best Anthony

Christine Smith: Hi everyone. Thought y'all might be interested in a new recording coming out at the end of the month called "The Music of Eddie South." Unable to break into the classical scene due to the rampant racism during his lifetime (1904–1962), Eddie was a star in the vaudeville and jazz scenes, playing with such legends as Django Reinhardt. Paul Nero even dedicated the classic tune "Hot Canary" to South. Jeremy Cohen and the rest of Violin Jazz pay tribute to "The Dark Angel of the Violin" on this new CD and give him the recognition he deserves! [. . .] Thanks! Christine

AB: Christine. It is something of a myth that South wanted to be a strictly classical musician (whether or not he recorded and broadcast in the genre, which he did) though it is certainly true that had he wished to be he would have encountered what you describe. The truth is that South was at heart, for all his prodigious classical technique, an improvisor. There are hardly two performances by him of the same piece played the same way, even on adjacent studio takes. That is the heart of a true jazz musician. It is not typical of someone with classical music ambitions. Nero, by the way, was a brilliant technician who composed his seemingly improvisational phrases. There is

recorded evidence that he was not capable of thinking improvisationally on his feet. Well, Christine, you have prompted me to jump ahead. I have already spoken about these things, with particular emphasis on Nero, in a future part of this interview. Anthony

AB: Follow up about South: Please be aware that there are errors concerning South's career in the online product description for Jeremy Cohen's Dorian CD Music of Eddie South. This is a shame because the project had access to the South bio-discography Black Gypsy and related CDs from AB Fable, Jazz Oracle, Frog, Soundies. I have not seen the finished CD [as at 2010] so I cannot comment on the state of the liner notes.

Part Three, The Hot Club of Robinson County

SP: Any comments on the divide between the stylistic approaches of Grappelli and Stuff Smith and their respective statuses both in the jazz world and among music fans that are not jazz aficionados? Where does the Manouche/French Gypsy violin style stand in your concept of the jazz world?

AB: Let's talk, as we have long promised ourselves, about the Hot Club of Robinson County. It may well be the best Hot Club there is. Why? Because, as we know, it doesn't exist. There is no Robinson County. That says a lot about what I think whenever I see the words Hot Club. I'm sighing with disillusion before I've even listened and rarely feel illuminated after I've listened. Reinhardt and Grappelli made something special, unique. No doubt about it. Though I wonder how Reinhardt and Smith would have sounded . . . wishful thinking? Well, I did dream once that I walked into some kind of restaurant somewhere in Europe and they were there . . . I guess that dream will not come true though others have. In my teens I would summon up recordings by Smith with Teddy Wilson or with Duke Ellington. There were no such recordings. Then one day there were: airchecks. Dreams come true.

Back to the Hot Clubs. It is a tiresome thing to follow, I mean for the listener to have to listen over and over to, for the most part, mediocre chugchugs or paltry efforts to appear to be updating. The technical ability of any given violinist is not the issue here, by the way. I'm going to get into trouble, I imagine. So be it. And just maybe I am expressing a feeling that is more prevalent, though hidden, than might be thought. I want to say: Stop It! Look, I don't want to be a killjoy. I know very well it is a lovely social thing, all those gypsy jazz meetings, for example, and I know too that gigs are going to be scarce on the ground for more than a few violinists if they don't do really very imitative Grappelli things, whether in a Hot Club or gypsy jazz or generalized swing mode. But we are talking about music here, not just social gatherings. Gypsy jazz: it is impossible meaningfully to describe Reinhardt as a purveyor of gypsy jazz. And, again, there are some truly accomplished and individualistic violinists post the era of the Quintette du Hot Club de France who masquerade under the gypsy jazz rubric but who are really quite something else. I might mention Charles Roman and Zipflo Weinrich as examples. But I don't want to distract from my underlying thesis. So, stop it! If you can. If you have something you believe you can move on to. It is music you want to make, isn't it? Yet, lest I be misunderstood, it is not out of the question to deliver authentic new renditions of past genres: the Carolina Chocolate Drops a case in point, a wonderful string and jug band. Where your heart is.

In the 96-page essay "Almost Like Being in Bop", accompanying the 2CD set *I Like Be I Like Bop*, I sought to rationalize, as much for my own understanding as anyone else's, the perceived preeminent status of Grappelli. I think the best thing I can do is to give here the relevant passage intact: "Why of all jazz violinists was Grappelli the one who found widest and longest lasting favor with audiences both inside and outside jazz? Grappelli's violinistic technique appealed to classical aficionados and easy-on-the-ears listeners alike while

offering a palatable difference; his musicality was suffused with light nostalgia, not least for France and the Hot Club—what profusion there is of mundane imitations in movies and TV items with the merest hint of things French or jaunty. Violinist–vocalist Nicole Yarling in *Strings*, December 2004: 'A lot of violinists gravitate toward Stéphane Grappelli because his style was very ornate and close to a classical player's style.' Memory of the Jazz Age but rarely nostalgia—well, some strains of Italian romanticism—in Venuti; nor in intricate, intellectual Asmussen. No nostalgia in violinistically unorthodox Smith, however pretty or poignant he played (notwithstanding his role as probably the only jazz violinist whose influence extends beyond his instrument); while South's was an altogether heavier affair." Later in the essay: "South played on the full sound of the wood. Who else reproduces that sound of the violin's substance?"

Response

Michael Steinman: Much of what is purveyed as "gypsy jazz" is entertaining music, expertly played. BUT. Just as the OKeh people didn't care how many people were in Louis's Hot Five because the name sold the records, "gypsy jazz" has long been a marketable commodity for public consumption. It is this century's "jazz" equivalent of the "Dixieland-by-the-yard" bands once prevalent. Promoters could understand this unthreatening, "fun" music; woodshedding string players could aspire to it. I am asked to review many new CDs by these groups, and they're almost all pleasing, but only a few of these players have transcended their own technique to construct memorable solos. And just as an aside, I admired Grappelli's playing in the Thirties with Django but always thought of him as the non-singing Chevalier without the straw hat.

Part Four, Bop to Hop

SP: What do you think of the effect of pickups on jazz violin's acceptance and whether it is a positive, negative or neutral trend? Any opinions on the current crop of pickups; acoustic vs. solid body instruments; appearance of 5 string models?

AB: I am not a practicing violinist myself so I am unable to answer from a musician's point of view. But I do have some observations from a listener's point of view, partly as a result of my own listening but also as a result of exchanges, mostly off-the-cuff, with violinists including Paul Anastasio, Sam Bardfeld, UK-based Graham Clark, Italy-based Stefano Pastor, and Finland-based Ari Poutiainen.

Firstly, for some background, I would like to ask readers to refer to *Fiddle Sessions* "Electric Violins and Jazz Violinists 1930s–1950s" [see below, following "Musings"].

There are so many pickups, transducers, on the market today, which connect amplification to the instrument in a number of ways and positions. Different violinists will have their personal reasons for opting for one or another. Some because they seek an acoustic sound as unaltered as possible; others who know there must be some compromise and who settle for the one that suits them best; others who probably do want to take on board an alteration to tonal quality. Hanno Graesser and Andy Holliman included an exhaustive overview of historical and current pickups in *Design and Technique of Electric Bowed Stringed Instruments* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998, English and German text). Since then many new devices have appeared. It seems as if hardly an issue of *Strings* or *Fiddler Magazine* goes by without some recommendation or publicity claiming true acoustic fidelity for, yet again, the first time.

As a listener, I do have a preference for amplified acoustic instruments, or purpose-built open-body instruments, over solid-body instruments. For example, Cuban violinist Omar Puente, who has settled in England, plays very fine in a variety of genres. But to my ears there is a problem. He plays a Zeta and I get no sense of varying dynamics, as if it is all at one characterless flat level. I thought to mention this to Sam Bardfeld when I last had the chance to talk with him because he is the author of the highly regarded book *Latin Violin* (New York, 2001). He told me that many of the Cuban players love the Zeta. Well, perhaps they think it gives them some advantage in handling a certain kind of fast fluidity, although I don't see why it should. I think they are losing out. Perhaps the manufacturers of solid-body instruments have work to do.

There is nothing wrong with five string models. I dare say more such acoustic instruments would have existed but for the stress on the instrument body. Elek Bacsik, Ponty, Urbaniak, for example, have all played purpose-built open-body amplified instruments to great effect. And I have to admit too that I have heard, and seen on video, Urbaniak play very fine, with Freddy Hubbard, on a solid-body instrument.

SP: Any sense of where the violin is headed in the jazz scene?

AB: Following on from the last question, Stefano Pastor has a unique take on amplification, coaxing husky soprano and alto sax and shakuhachi-like tones from his violin. Of course, he is not alone in introducing new tonal, and phrasing, qualities: Micro-tonal Matt Maneri, for example. Phil Durrant in England and Mike Khoury are among those who can be cited too. But where the violin is headed in jazz has to be related to the much broader question of where jazz as a whole is headed, or, rather, where jazz currently is. There seems to be a general retrenchment. Even Pastor has published a book *Violinjazz: analisi degli aspetti esecutivi e tecnico-interpretativi* (Monza, 2008, Italian text only but with accompanying CD of the examples) which is really about bebop. Ari Poutiainen's *Stringprovisation* (Helsinki, 2009, in English) is also very much concerned with the historical legacy of swing and bebop. And there is certainly everything to be gained by understanding the past. Pastor and Poutiainen have, by the way, recorded a most adventurous album of duets, released in UK on Slam. I have written the liner notes so I should own up to a sort of vested interest. Swing and neo-bop facilities are also, I would say, greatly favored at, for example, Berklee, though not, of course, only there. Zach Brock, out of Chicago, I believe, is a fluent bop player. The example of Berklee is worrying. There are brilliant technicians among the tutors and among a number of ex-pupils but also I often detect among the latter a tendency towards a kind of equalized professional competence rather than adventure and invention or simply an individual voice. And that can be a disappointment. Perhaps it is explained partly by career pressures. As if lessons of post-Coltrane and post-Ornette Coleman so-called free improvisation, whether developed through jazz or European sensibilities, to say nothing of Asian inputs, are played out. (It is not for nothing that I write so-called. Violinist Graham Clark, for example, has written a most pertinent article about the structures of free improvisation: *Improvisation* accessible at http://www.grahamviolin.com/articles.html)

I have something more to say about the thorny question of brilliant technique: in 1944, the year in which the Stuff Smith Trio recorded their Asch album, and were heard frequently over the radio and at the Onyx Club in New York, violinist Rima Rudina wrote a master's thesis at Eastman School of Music entitled *Hot Jazz and the Violin*, focusing on Paul Nero's 1940 Decca album *Solo Flight*, the sheet music of which was published in 1943. It is indeed a fascinating suite—Nero held a pilot's license—but all the evidence from the totality of his recording career points to him not being an able improvisor but a composer of intricate, frequently novelty, fixed routines, and a sought-after commercial violinist. Indeed, his 1945 book *Fiddler's Handbook* is subtitled *"Hot Tips" for the Commercial Fiddler*. Eddie South, to whom, incidentally, Nero dedicated his "Hot Canary"

arrangement of Poliakin, for all his prodigious classical technique, never played the same piece twice the same way, even in adjacent studio takes. What would be the point? It must have been ground-breaking for Rudina, who went on to record a couple of high-class supper club and world music LPs, to write an academic thesis on jazz violin in 1944 but, whether solely out of her own inclinations or pressure from the academy, Rudina has virtually nothing constructive to say about anyone else—notably, she is quietly dismissive of, for example, Stuff Smith, seeing in him only rough antics in contrast to what for her is Nero's high "hot jazz" achievement. Only one recording, a 1950s jam session, is known of Nero obviously attempting spontaneous improvisation. Unable to think on his feet, he falls back into the safety of his well-rehearsed compositional phrases. Clearly, this 1944 estimation of what counts as "Hot Jazz and the Violin" is a travesty. Rudina's own effort at a blues is a classical—and I do not mean classic blues—construct. Nothing wrong, of course, in writing a thesis about Nero and I have to say that what Nero did accomplish is preferable to a certain level of recently schooled violinists who are under the impression, doubtless as a result of having been given the impression, that they can take half a dozen lessons in improvisation and then go out and record in whatever jazz or folk or world style, or all of them at the same time, to which they may have taken a superficial shine.

Back to Ornette Coleman for a moment. It was quite natural for Stuff Smith to reply, when asked by a Swedish journalist—they were touring Europe in the same concert package—what he thought of Coleman's violin playing: "I think he should stick to his alto sax." Hard to know what else Smith could have been expected to say when put on the spot like that. In fact, there exists a delightful airport photo of Smith and Coleman together, smiling, looking slightly askance at each other, as if Coleman is saying: "I play the violin a little too, you know." And Smith: "Oh, er, yeah!" (The photo is reproduced in *Up Jumped the Devil*, the supplement to *Desert Sands*, and in the booklet to the 2CD set *I Like Be I Like Bop*.) I recounted this to Dan Morgenstern whose response is given here with his permission: "Ornette's fiddling is oddly appealing, I prefer it to his trumpeting. With some trepidation, I took my father [Vienna-circle writer Soma Morgenstern] to a concert in which Ornette also played his left-handed, amplified violin, which he handled in the most unorthodox manner. My father, who had been at one time a music critic, played the cello as a young man (first chair in student orchestra), and, as you know, was great friends with Alban Berg, a.o., was never hostile to jazz but became really interested as my involvement developed and I was able to take him to concerts, festivals etc., which he much enjoyed [. . .]. About Ornettes fiddling he said: 'He gets what he wants.' I was delighted."

Of course, the lessons of free improvisation are not played out, as a reading of the variety of releases reviewed in, for example, *Cadence Magazine*, shows. But I would definitely say there are signs of instability, about what to do or where to go. And therefore about what to think too. There is also an extraordinary phenomenon of improvisatory hip-hop violinists, more interesting than the tendency to predictability of the use, whether ferocious or sentimental, of the fiddle in latter-day rock. Hip-hop violin is fascinating. Who would have thought to find it there. It might be that hip-hop violinists are the true heirs to Stuff Smith's 1930s antics. But, never forget, those antics were only ever a part of Smith.

Responses

Julie Lyonn Lieberman: I would like to add to Anthony's wonderful interview, to let folks know that The Electric Violin Shop, located in North Carolina, is the only store in the world dedicated to every bowed strings amplification option known on the planet. They give excellent phone support and are an incredible resource. I remember the old days, when we bought every little thing that came out, hoping for the right solution. EVS can save everyone a lot of time and money! http://www.electricviolinshop.com/index.cfm

Jan Palethorpe: Hi Anthony, very interesting article—where can I find some info on the hip hop violinists you speak of? I just arrived in NY after seeing Ornette Coleman play his horn and violin at the San Marino jazz festival in Italy. best wishes Jan

AB: Julie, Thank you very much. EVS definitely the place to go. Jan, For the most obvious person who immediately comes to mind visit http://www.miribenari.com but there are many others and youtube and bing or google search should lead you to them. Very best Anthony

AB: I guess I should have mentioned the hiphoppers Black Violin, who take their name from an album by the Stuff himself.

Graham Clark: Thanks for the link to my essays, Anthony. I would like to comment on the use of pick ups or dedicated electric violins. My own preference for most jazz or improvising settings is to play my acoustic, unamplified. If that won't work, then I use a hyper-cardioid condenser mic, which was something that Mark Feldman suggested to me. Of course, this only works up to medium volumes, owing to feedback problems, so a different solution needs to be found for very loud settings. Aside from the kazoo-like qualities of almost all solid violins using piezo bridge pickups, the biggest drawback is the response of a solid fiddle. An acoustic instrument has a level of springiness that allows the player to use the bow in a huge variety of ways. The instrument itself has tensions and flexibility, while on a solid you only get the give of the string. There is no springiness in the instrument. I have an electric that does have that give, because it isn't totally solid and mounts the pick up and bridge in a springy bar. However there are still feedback tendencies, and a lack of certain resonances, so I need to balance the EQ with a parametric equaliser. gc

Mark Woodyatt: I thought it might be pertinent to this discussion to add a little of my own experience. Just to fill some of my esteemed colleagues and the general community in, I like to think of myself as a classically trained and funk-fusion influenced world violinist. I am thankful to both be able to read and improvise to nearly anything. It's an amazing gift to have that I'm very thankful for, and I'm always looking to improve on my feel and approach, but I have to stress "being adventurous" is key in discovering my (and possibly your) limitations. Learning technique and listening to as many possible genres and artists helps too. I have been using the same acoustic violin for the past 14 years, for a variety of applications . . . classical, country, fusion, rock and jazz, to name a few, and I've been perfectly happy with this violin, for the most part. Once I decided to step it up and get it (a 1996 Gliga Vasile Romanian Instrument —one of the last this master oversaw himself) modified, I went up to Yonkers to Ron Fletcher's shop on a recommendation from my teacher Rob Thomas of NYC. He simply cut and installed an L. R. Baggs bridge pickup and adjusted the action by lowering the bridge height. This fine piezo pickup, paired with or without the Para-acoustic DI is very nice for the money and I love it. Granted, Ron adjusted the action, but from years of experience with this, I've noticed a dramatic difference when it comes down to strings, the idea of which prompted me to write this response in the first place. I'd like to point out that my experience with strings is a bit limited, as are my funds . . . and there are some new strings on the market specifically for electric violins, but I've had much success using either medium tension dominants, or medium tension D'Addario helicores (which I bought after going to Jean-Luc Ponty's website and seeing that he liked these . . .) I'm a fan of Jean-Luc's sound, especially when it was its electric freshest-like on Visions of the Emerald Beyond by the great Mahavishnu Orchestra and Cosmic Messenger. However, perhaps some of those afforementioned problems with the dynamics as Anthony mentioned, such as with the Zeta could be averted with the correct light-to medium tension strings and with the right bow. Anyone ever try a "baroque" bow? They sound great with jazz—at least the fine one that the Eastman school let me borrow way back when I was a jazz violin major there in 2003 . . . (I've alas long since returned, but I use a bow currently that is made by a baroque expert that seems to sound better on the lighter strings and have quicker action. Bingo! Though I still don't own a solid body [. . .] I stand by my acoustic hybrid—because it still sounds great. Aside from high decibal situations, I can recommend to Anyone who has sound issues that are unsatifactory, that you start from the pickup to the amp with the highest quality cables and components, and if there are any issues, try experimenting on warming up the sound by plugging into certain drivers and effects. I like the Electro-Harmonix Holy Grail for a little warmth and "verb" (at the end of all the fx), and I plug my DI into the "Ego-Booster" drive pedal, with the blue light—for anything that needs a punch—which sends a crisper signal that can be tailored to quality and brightness of sound the situation/music demands. From there, I send the signal into a whole smorgasboard of Fx for my fusion applications. The dynamic

contrast with my wood fiddle would be hard to beat with a solid body, so I have to agree with Anthony that it's hard to beat. I mean, Stuff Smith had a great sound over 60 years ago, so it's kind of hard to get better than mic'ing a nice acoustic, which I do whenever I can . . . I will continue to update you all as I discover new sounds, and look forward to learning more through you. Thanks

Part Five, Capturing the Imagination

AB: It must be pretty obvious where my original, and some of my later, allegiances lie, so I shall not dwell too much on them except to say that in searching for players who truly capture the imagination I do not seek a new Stuff Smith, or Eddie South, or Venuti or Grappelli or Asmussen or Nance. Regina Carter said recently, in *Strings*: "The world does not need another Grappelli." Particularly true of Grappelli, as I have tried to express, to little avail I fear, in earlier parts of this interview, but also true of all the original masters and others who are less well known, in a couple of cases as yet unidentified even.

There are many violinists whose virtues, for one reason or another, I can appreciate. It would be invidious to set about naming them all. I am bound to omit some so I shall not even try. Instead I shall concentrate on a very few.

Of those who are long gone Ray Perry is the standout link between swing and bop. He definitely died too young. What we do have of him consists of tightly knit chamber-like pieces with Lionel Hampton's small group, two sets of privately recorded lacquers, trenchant modernist blues backings to Ethel Waters with J. C. Heard's orchestra, and, recently recovered, unreleased (as yet) airchecks with the complete Hampton orchestra. Good but not enough. He did record after that, with Illinois Jacquet, but only on alto sax. We have to wonder what he would have done had he lived into the LP era and post bop developments. And why wasn't the recorder switched on when he jammed at Minton's with Smith and Nance, as recounted by Sabby Lewis? We have to wonder too what Juice Wilson would have done with his violin had he not disappeared from view following his 1929 London recordings with Noble Sissle. A truly phenomenal bop violinist who is often overlooked is Elek Bacsik. His two LP albums for Bob Thiele: *I Love You* and *Bird and Dizzy: A Tribute* have never been released on CD. That's bad.

I have, to put it mildly, more than a few soft spots for Billy Bang, who traces his lineage to Smith, and the late Leroy Jenkins, who traces his lineage to South. Lineage or not they are both truly original and inventive voices and I am not interested in hearing any animadversions concerning techniques. To borrow that quote from Soma Morgenstern: "They get what they want." Actually, they get far more than that. And in their different ways they are also significant composers.

I am utterly bowled over by the Max Roach Double Quartet, the first touring version of which included, along with Maxine Roach, the late Gayle Dixon and her sister cellist Akua Dixon. This was not the first incarnation of the Double Quartet but it was the first stable personnel. For some unaccountable reason no recording by this historic version of the Quartet has been released, though tapes exist. I count myself fortunate to have heard a few airchecks and the more so to have heard extraordinary private rehearsal tapes of the string section alone with Max Roach's brushes on the telephone directory.

But what of my "Desert Island Discs"? If, as a castaway, I were permitted recordings by only one present-day violinist I do not have to think long about who that would be. India Cooke. As I have written in a postscript

to a celebration of Ginger Smock in *The Strad* (November 2010), Cooke's improvisations range from the quietly lyrical to innovative duets with bassist Jöelle Léandre. The latter perhaps no surprise given Cooke's one-time membership of Sun Ra's aggregation. But if, in your book, that may not be a recommendation, do not be fooled: Cooke is the most musically and violinistically accomplished player imaginable, as well as being a truly unique voice, who has accompanied the likes of Sarah Vaughan, Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder. But back to her skills as an improvisor: seek out at least the following (the dates are of release, not always recording): her own *RedHanded* (Music & Arts, 1996), guest appearances with George Sams *Nomadic Winds* (Hat, 1982), E. W. Wainwright *African Roots of Jazz* (Plainisphare, 1990), Lisle Ellis *What We Live Fo(u)r* (Black Saint, 1994), duets with Jöelle Léandre *At the Le Man Jazz Festival* (Leo, 2006), *Fire Dance* (Red Toucan, 2006), *Journey* (NoBusiness, a Lithuanian label, 2010). And what shall I say about her sweet collaboration with Barbara Cooke, her mother, *Sometimes I Feel: A Collection of Negro Spirituals for Voice and Instruments* (Barbara Cooke, 2002)? I shall listen again on my island's solar powered CD player.

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Electric Violins and Jazz Violinists 1930s–1950s

Stuff Smith and the National Dobro VioLectric

The earliest documented efforts to amplify the jazz violin electrically were those of Stuff Smith and drummer A. G. Godley in the Alphonso Trent Orchestra in 1928. The previous year R. F. Starzl had introduced his Giant Tone Radio Violin, with a pickup fitted in the f hole of a normal violin. Purpose-built electric violins can be dated to the turn of that decade. The skeletal frame Makhonine violin may have been the first to be demonstrated, in Paris in 1930. Smith and Godley's experiment was unsuccessful and Smith resorted to the horned Stroh violin:

"I always had a problem before I had an amplifier [. . .] I used to cut off my bridges to make the violin louder, and I would get the band to play soft so I could be heard. The Trent band used to play waltzes real sweet. A. G. Godley and I tried to make an electric amplifier, but, when we got through, the guts of the amplifier were as big as a room. We had everything in it and it would pick up what I was playing, but only a tiny sound would come out. At first, I used to use a violin with a horn."

As Smith told Stanley Dance in a 1965 *Down Beat* interview (possibly taken a year or two earlier) reprinted in *The World of Swing* (New York, 1974; repr. New York 1979). Smith did not use the Stroh exclusively, though he recorded on it with Trent at least in 1928. A recently discovered photo of the Trent Orchestra depicts Smith holding his conventional violin, with his Stroh violin and a Stroh bass standing beside him. It is reproduced in the pamphlet *Stuff Smith and the Alphonso Trent Orchestra: A Newly Discovered Photo* (Lewes, 2009).

Smith was introduced to the conventionally shaped open-body National Dobro Vio-Lectric at New York City's Onyx Club by a female representative of the Chicago company. In all likelihood she was Loma Cooper, a light concert violinist who also ran a violin repair shop in Chicago, where she kept guard dogs named Stuff Smith and Fritz Kreisler. (On one occasion they truly found themselves in the doghouse for failing to stop a break-in.)

Smith told Dance: "I didn't get the amplifier until I was at the Onyx [. . .] There was a girl from Chicago, a classical violinist, who was working for a company trying to sell electrical violins. She came to the Onyx and got me to try one. I fell in love with it, because Jonah [Jones] and Cozy Cole were playing awful loud in those days and I used to have to hug the mike. But when I got this thing, I said to myself, 'Oh, oh, this is it, man!' "

In Valerie Wilmer's 1967 interview for *Jazz Beat*, reprinted in *Pure at Heart 2* (Lewes, 2002), Smith's enthusiasm for the instrument is a little more tempered:

"Stuff started using a proper amplifier in the late 1930s but before then he would cut his bridge between the A and the D strings to increase the instrument's volume. 'The old fiddlers used to slit it down like that. Another thing they used to do was get rattlesnakes' tails and dry 'em out and put 'em in the violin. That made a kind of vibration.' The violinist was given his first electric instrument by the manufacturing company in exchange for publicizing the combination. 'It sounded all right but it was just a little too metallic [. . .] So I started using a mute. I cocked my mute between the D and the G instead of between the E, A, and the D and the G—the full mute. I just used half of my mute to get the kind of tone I wanted. Before they gave me an amplifier, though, I had often thought of building something similar.' "

Smith, Loma Cooper, and Evelyn Kay (of predatory Phil Spitalny's all-women orchestra; Kay eventually married Spitalny) endorsed the Vio-Lectric in a composite ad in *Down Beat* (August 1938). Smith again endorsed it in an ad in *Down Beat* (15 November 1939) where it is called the Vio-Electric, which is probably just a mistake. In National Dobro's 1938 catalogue, and the 1940 catalogue in which Smith and Cooper are featured in separate endorsements, it is the Vio-Lectric and VioLectric, not the Vio-Electric. We must assume that this is the conventionally shaped electric instrument that appears in many late 1930s photos of Smith and with which he may have recorded from, say, 1938. Though not necessarily: a careful analysis of his late 1930s recordings is needed to try to determine on which sessions he may have first changed from acoustic to electric violin and whether, even after changing, he went electric on all such sessions. There are contemporary photos in which he is holding one of his acoustic violins. An oft-reproduced photo of Smith with a National Dobro amplifier in front of the Onyx Club also includes a billboard displaying a Charles Peterson photo of Smith's orchestra *c.* March 1937. It is quite possible that the billboard was still in use a while after personnel changes but it does raise the question whether Smith was using the Vio-Lectric as early as 1937. According to a perfunctory overview of electrical bowed strings in *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (many of the dates, for example, are imprecise) J. Dopyera of National Dobro developed the instrument in 1936. However, electric violin historian Ben Heaney claims its true inventor was F. H. Kislingbury, known to be an "assignor to E. E. Dopyera". Kislingbury filed drawings with the US Patent Office 26 July 1937. The patent was granted 29 August 1939.

But what of the 1940s? Smith lost two electric violins in a fire at the Three Deuces club, Chicago, 1 January 1940 (reported in *Down Beat* magazine, 15 January 1940). If his Vio-Lectric was among those lost, it was replaced with a different instrument. A Charles Peterson photo from Hickory House, New York, March 1940, clearly shows Smith with a conventional violin with a pickup near the bridge. Unlike the Vio-Lectric, there is no belly control dial. Is it an amplification set-up by National or another manufacturer, whether personalized specifically for Smith or not? Presumably, from this point on, if not even earlier, this was Smith's preferred method of amplification. But it is not his strapped on DeArmand of the late 1940s or early 1950s onwards. "You know Stuff Smith played a DeArmand. It was the best before Barcus-Berry." Johnny Gimble told Stacy Phillips in *Western Swing Fiddle* (New York, 1994). In this field, Kevin Coffey relates that Smith admirers Buddy

Ray and Dickie Jones were recording with electrically amplified violins in the Village Boys by 1941. "This was unusual for the time and quite deliberate in their seeking a particular sound." It is believed they were using their normal violins with attached pickups. Texas fiddler Bob Kendrick, professionally known as Bob Skyles, appears to have rigged his own electric pickup device as early as 1936. By the 1950s many country fiddlers were using the DeArmand. It must be the DeArmand that is visible is most photos of Smith from the 1950s onwards. But he did not use it exclusively.

A video is extant of Smith's kinescoped Los Angeles television performance on *Stars of Jazz*, 26 March 1958, which shows him playing a conventionally shaped open-body purpose-built electric violin. It is not his National Dobro of the 1930s, which appears to have had only one built-in control on the belly near the tailpiece. (Kislingbury's patent drawings show a second control on one side's center bout; its presence or absence on production models cannot be determined from known photos.) This time the instrument has two built-in belly controls either side of the tailpiece. Country violinist Bus Boyk, in a telephone conversation with the present writer, is adamant that he saw, and spoke with, Smith playing a white electric National violin in a Las Vegas West Side (Black district) club with stage dancers in 1957 or 1958. The *Stars of Jazz* instrument does indeed appear to be white; despite poor definition lighting that has lightened Smith's face, the controls are dark on what seems to be a light-colored instrument, not an overlit dark instrument. The same instrument appears on the red-hued covers of two Smith Verve LPs where it appears dark on one and light on the other. The photos are certainly not related to the sessions themselves. Date wise, the instrument cannot be present on *Have Violin, Will Swing*, and it is unlikely to be present on *Cat on a Hot Fiddle*. (Smith's session photo on the cover of Verve LP *Stuff Smith* shows his DeArmand pickup.) Ben Heaney offers this opinion: "I think it is probably a later version of the National instrument. R. and E. E. Dopera [aka Dopyera] filed for a patent on 8 September 1959, granted 11 April 1961, for what is a slight variation of Kislingbury's 1939 patent. The control difference is that there is no center bout dial on the Dopyera, only a single belly dial. As there aren't any patent drawings similar to Smith's 1958 instrument with two belly dials, his may be a one-off development model."

Smith's single guest title from this telecast, on which, it has to be said, he is somewhat hampered by an inappropriate rhythm section from the Red Nichols' orchestra, was released on LP Calliope CAL3006 *Sessions Live*. (An earlier appearance on *Stars of Jazz*, 2 December 1957, is extant only as audio, also released, though without Smith's final sign-off performance, on LP Calliope CAL3016 *Sessions Live*.) Why was Smith not playing his favorite violin of the period, Big Red with attached DeArmand, at least at the time of the 1958 show? Mrs Arlene Smith reported in the Smith bio-discography *Desert Sands* (Lewes, 1995) that Big Red was stolen and not recovered for many months. Did the 1958 *Stars of Jazz* performance and Bus Boyk's Las Vegas sighting take place during this period of loss? It would certainly explain things. A video of some of Smith's four appearances on Art Ford *Jazz Party* telecasts from Newark, NJ, later that year appear to show Smith playing Big Red, as does an extant video of a performance with Ella Fitzgerald and *Jazz at the Philharmonic* in Amsterdam, 5 May 1957.

There are few studio or concert recordings of Smith from the 1940s onwards on which he plays acoustic violin, though there are many such private recordings, many of which have been released. However, a 1946 photo of Smith with Dizzy Gillespie at the Apollo shows him hugging the mike with an acoustic instrument. Exceptionally, he can be heard playing acoustic on unauthorized releases from a 1965 Paris concert, alongside Big Joe Turner, Buck Clayton, Vic Dickenson, Kenny Clarke, among others. An amplifier promised by the organizers failed to materialize.

Smith is known to have disliked electric violins that were not conventionally shaped (i.e. solid-body, stick-like, or skeletal) but he may have owned at least one. According to his grandson Leroy Smith, in a 1995 telephone conversation with the present writer, there exists [now lost in a fire] among Smith's effects a yellow electric violin without f holes. It is not clear whether this is a solid-body or open-body instrument. It is not the white instrument of *Stars of Jazz*, which has f holes. And here is a mystery: in 1999 an electric violin, with traditional violin outline design but totally skeletal, was offered for sale in Copenhagen. It bears a plaque reading Stuff Smith that, although not in signature form, has led to speculation that the violin belonged to Smith. It says it was built by A. Baux, Toulon [France]. No one who was in Smith's close company during his last two and a half years in Europe (he was based in Denmark from where he traveled frequently throughout Europe) remembers such an instrument. Did an admiring maker present it to him only for him to dispose of it quickly? Was it skeletally modeled after Big Red, with or without Smith's knowledge. Did its first owner know Smith or his music and simply wish to honor him? Or is the whole attribution spurious: A. Baux, Toulon? A bow, violon [Fr.]? [Baux is a recognized French surname but: allow your writer this!]

Ray Perry and the Vega Electric Violin

Currently, there are six known photos of Ray Perry with violin, showing at least two different electrically amplified instruments. Two photos are dated 1939. Firstly, the *Baltimore Afro-American* (16 September 1939) shows Perry with the Smiling Kings of Rhythm at the Silver Dollar, Boston. Secondly, the Vega electric instruments catalogue, No. 33, printed October 1939, includes a photo of Ray Perry, Boston, as well as other endorsements by dance band and theatre orchestra violinists, which shows Perry playing the Boston company's stick-like solid-body electric violin, with Vega amplifier. Vega's instrument was by no means the first of its kind but it does appear to have been the first to gain currency. (Hugo Benioff, for example, applied for a patent for a quite different stick-like instrument on 2 April 1938, granted 19 November 1940, but neither it nor his later skeletal instrument of conventional shape made it into production.) The available microfilm photocopy of the *BAA* Perry photo is not good enough to distinguish the shape of the violin but its electric cable is visible. Surely it is the Vega.

Three photos show Perry with Lionel Hampton or with Hampton's orchestra, with whom Perry played violin and alto sax 1940-1943. He recorded on violin, almost certainly audibly on electric violin, with small group off-shoots of the main orchestra, rereleased on countless Hampton CDs, and on unreleased airchecks with the complete ochestra. Firstly, a studio shot of Perry with the stick-like Vega, along with Hampton, endorsing the instrument appears in Vega's ad in *Down Beat* (1 October 1941). Secondly, a photo of five members of the Hampton orchestra at a Seattle venue in *Metronome* (November 1940) shows Perry soloing on violin. Definition is poor. It may or may not be the Vega. It may or may not be a conventionally shaped instrument. Nor is a cable immediately in evidence though it would be surprising if, at this point, it were a completely unamplified instrument. Vernon Alley is also seen in the photo, playing his stick-like electric bass. Vega manufactured such an instrument though this does not appear to be it. Howard Rumsey was photographed playing the Los Angeles company Rickenbacker's tubular bass with Stan Kenton in 1941. In 2004 Rumsey told Stephen Fratallone at http://www.jazzconnectionmag.com : "I played it for a year. The Rickenbacker guitar company built an electric bass and gave one to me and one to Moses Allen who was in Jimmie Lunceford's band." Does Rumsey really mean Vernon Alley with Hampton rather than Allen with Lunceford? Or did all three play the instrument? Alley's bass certainly looks tubular. Rumsey also reported Decca's early problems recording an electric bass satisfactorily.

Thirdly, and more crucially, what are we to make of the well-defined undated photo, reproduced in the liner notes to CD AB Fable ABCD1-006 *Ray Perry*, which also shows Perry soloing with the Hampton orchestra? He is playing an electrically amplified violin, with clearly visible cable, but it is certainly not the stick-like Vega. Instead, it is a conventionally shaped open-body violin and looks as if it may be one with pickup attached, as in the 1940 Hickory House photo of Smith, rather than a purpose-built electric instrument. There is no belly control. So, again, is this an amplification set-up by Vega or National or another manufacturer, whether personalized specifically for Perry or not? Smith and Perry were close. Are they, by the early 1940s, using the same attached pickup system?

At some point, presumably after he left Hampton, Perry appears to have abandoned the purpose-built electric and/or pickup amplified violin altogether. He plays unamplified acoustic violin on the 1944 trio and 1945 group recordings released on the AB Fable CD *Ray Perry*. It would be possible to explain that by their being private home recordings but for a review in *Down Beat* (17 June 1946) of a Perry trio engagement at the Spotlight Club, New York, opposite Dizzy Gillespie's big band: "Ex-Boston boy and Hampton-ite Perry now playing straight rather than electric violin comes on with some of the most frantic ideas and unusual conception heard recently on Swing Street." Perry also sounds as if he is playing an acoustic instrument (he also plays alto) on his 1946 recordings for Continental as a member of J. C. Heard's orchestra accompanying Ethel Waters.

In 1946 and 1947, and again in 1949 and 1950, Perry recorded only on alto as a member of Illinois Jacquet's ochestras. Nevertheless, he played violin off-record. A photo of Perry soloing on violin appeared in *Pittsburgh Courier* (28 January 1950). No one else is shown but the caption implication is that this is a photo of him with a new Jacquet orchestra. He is hugging the microphone playing an unamplified acoustic violin, despite Jacquet's orchestra of the time being a big band. In the available indistinct copy what might be taken as a truncated light-colored cable is not that but a neck chord for supporting his alto sax. Such a chord can also be seen in the undated Hampton photo, together with cable. Perry's brief and under-recorded life came to an end autumn 1950 with complications during illness.

(Western Swing fiddler Cliff Brunner is known to have owned a Vega but he neither liked nor recorded on it.)

Ginger Smock and the Beauchamp Rickenbacker Electro Violin

Los Angeles Central Avenue violinist Ginger Smock recorded on the stick-like Beauchamp Rickenbacker Electro violin once, before abandoning it in favor of an unamplified conventional violin. Some Rickenbacker violins were tubular, as was their bass. The Rickenbacker appears on her 1946 recording session, a four-title bop to ballads all-women pickup session under bassist Vivien Garry's leadership, supervised by Leonard Feather for RCA Victor. One coupling was included in the 78 album *Girls in Jazz*, the inside cover of which includes a photo of the group during recording. The other coupling was released separately as a single. All four titles are released together for the first time on CD AB Fable ABCD1-010 *Ginger Smock*. One track has never before been rereleased, either on CD or LP. That was the end of electrics for Smock. She did not care for it. There is the suggestion that she was persuaded to use the Rickenbacker on the 1946 session; that it was loaned, or given, to her by the Los Angeles company. Nor does any later photo of her show her playing an instrument with a pickup. Yet Smock's mike-hugging acoustic violin on ferocious 1950s rhythm and blues sessions reveals that she did just fine among the horns.

Stéphane Grappelli and Uncertainly Identified Electric Violin

Stéphane Grappelli is not often associated with electric violins but there are a couple of matters worth examining.

A London *Melody Maker* (15 November 1952) Max Jones interview-article with Grappelli is headlined with Grappelli's attributed words, "Now the Violin Can Find a Real Place in Jazz . . .": "In his Variety act with pianist Yorke de Sousa, Grappelly [*sic*] still uses his standard violin. But for dances and jazz sessions his improvisations are now amplified directly he puts bow to steel strings. He is an enthusiastic exponent of the electric violin—an American instrument that radio listeners heard for the first time in *World of Jazz* on November 1. 'Of course the instrument's full value cannot be realized from a record or broadcast [. . .] because the amplifier isn't really needed then. The tone sounds different, yes; but you must hear this violin in a hall to get the whole effect. It is wonderful.' The wonder instrument is a curious sawn-off looking thing, visually unimpressive and extraordinarily heavy. We wanted to know if it demanded a special technique. [. . .] 'The fingerboard is the same, but it has to have metal strings. For me, the finger-pressure is about the same as I normally use, but the bowing is different. This needs great control [. . .] You must have very steady bowing, for every little sound is enlarged through the loudspeaker. Each time I am going to use the electric fiddle I must get used to it again; I must play all day. [. . .] It isn't easy to play well at first, but once you have mastered this fiddle it is fantastic. [. . .] This fiddle is definitely better than the normal one for jazz playing; there is no comparison. For solos it is powerful and exciting. [. . .] It means that the violin can take a full part in the jazz orchestra at last. It's no longer a little voice; it's more like four fiddles. I mean, I may play louder than four fiddles, but, of course, the sound is not the same. In fact, it is an entirely new sound, and eventually it will add new tone colour to jazz recordings, too.' "

For all the hype, and there is more, some of it quite silly, Grappelli's enthusiasm is hardly believable, playing to the journalistic gallery no doubt. Was he being asked to test it or endorse it? It is doubtful that he hung on to the instrument long or that he ever recorded on it. There do not seem to be any contemporary recordings by Grappelli. Stupidly, the instrument is neither named nor shown in the accompanying photo, in which Grappelli is seen with an acoustic violin. Why? Did editorial policy forbid the naming of the manufacturer? However, an issue of *The New Musical Express* the previous month (3 October 1952) does include a photo of Grappelli playing the unnamed instrument "made in the States". It is stick-like, along the lines of some Vega and Rickenbacker models but not exactly like those known elsewhere. But then it is some years later. Its modeling most closely resembles a Vega but it should be noted from Vega's 1939 catalogue: "You can use any kind of strings, regardless whether metal or gut, as no special strings are necessary. It is light in weight and balanced so that it is easy to play." Would Vega have regressed over twelve years to the "extraordinarily heavy" instrument in need of steel strings described in the *Melody Maker*, assuming that Vega's catalogue description is accurate? Ben Heaney: "Grappelli's instrument is almost certainly a Vega violin. There definitely appear to be two dials, which rules out the Beauchamp Rickenbacker. Also the stub of the upper bout is too different to be a Beauchamp. My only doubt creeps in because this is some years after the Vega violin first appeared and it didn't really have any impact on the market then. Why was Grappelli playing it?" Why indeed! A still of the *NME* photo can be seen in DVD Music on Earth MoE 101 *Stéphane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*. [All things considered an excellent production, curiously unlike the director's basic-error-ridden hagiography *Stéphane Grappelli: With and Without Django* (London, 2003) which is best avoided unless read with the utmost circumspection. For example, Michel Warlop never recorded classical music under the nom-de-musique

Waclaw Niemczyk, who was a different and very real violinist; a canard unfortunately picked up from *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 2nd ed.]

Joe Venuti and Stéphane Grappelli Discuss Pickups

On 21 July 1974 Bill Bacin privately recorded Grappelli and Joe Venuti in conversation off-stage at the *Nice Jazz Festival* discussing the pros and cons of contact mikes. Venuti, to the surprise of Grappelli, expresses his dislike of the Barcus-Berry, used, particularly in the 1960s, by Ponty and many others, describing it as no good and shrill. Grappelli complains about a recent acoustic engagement where he could not be heard properly because of the venue's poor microphone. Venuti shows Grappelli his set-up, with separate controls for each string, custom-built for him by a German manufacturer whom he does not name.

Grappelli enthusiastically accepts Venuti's offer to send him one. Venuti also says he does not use the pickup in the recording studio, only during live performance. The original tape is deposited in the AB Fable Archive.

Paul Anastasio, who studied with Venuti, contributes: "To my knowledge, Joe never used anything made by Barcus-Berry and, in addition to his telling his feelings about those pickups to Grappelli, he told me as well, probably in 1977 or 1978, that he did not like the Barcus-Berrys because they were too shrill, which they were. When I saw Joe live and in photos taken at around the same time (late 1976–early 1978) he always used a DeArmand contact microphone attached to the top of the violin with a rubber band, as was also used, as you well know, by Stuff Smith. Earlier photos show Venuti using a rectangular tan pickup about which I have no knowledge, although it was almost certainly a contact mike along the lines of the DeArmand. If indeed this was the German pickup that Joe was referring to in his conversation with Grappelli, I strongly suspect that the separate controls for each string would have been controls on a separate graphic equalizer tailored to emphasize or de-emphasize the specific frequencies of each string, as a contact pickup would not deliver separate inputs from each string but only a signal converted from the vibration of the spot on the top where the pickup contacted the violin. After Joe's Sanctus Seraphim violin was stolen from his hotel room in New York (1972 or 1974) he played on an assortment of fairly average instruments, one of which, a violin made by Joseph Stamps of Fort Worth, Texas, he gave to me. On some of his later recordings he played electrically and either a direct line output was taken from the amp, or, much more likely, the amp was simply miked. Perhaps the recording engineers used a mike on the violin as well and blended the two signals for a more natural tone."

Latter-day photos of Grappelli sometimes show him with a pickup, and sometimes he went electric in the recording studio, such as on some tracks of a 1973 mixed genre album with Jean-Luc Ponty, which also included their swing tribute "Memorial Jam for Stuff Smith", but neither Grappelli nor Venuti were committed to amplification. Ben Heaney spoke with Grappelli at a concert in England in the early 1980s: "He was playing what I remember to be a blue electric violin with what I think was a silver bridge. [. . .] I can't remember what he said exactly but I do remember clearly his dislike of the electric violin."

Ray Nance and Stuff Smith

In Dance, *The World of Swing*, Stuff Smith, after describing his first introduction to the electric violin, continued: "There isn't much difference between it and playing the violin close up to a good mike. A classical violinist wouldn't use it, because he couldn't get the complete violin tone, but I think a jazzman should use it. You can relax more, because you don't have to press so hard on your strings and your chin, and you can develop more of

a technique with your bow and your fingers. You can phrase better than with the ordinary violin, where you have to phrase with your fingers, and your bow, and your chin. It's much easier with the electric violin, but if you hit a bad note—it's hit! [. . .] I imagine you'd hear more swing violinists if violinists would pick up the electrical violin or just use the violin amplifier with a pick-up. All the hoe-down boys in California use them, but a player like Eddie South never did. You do get just a slight metallic tone, but you have to learn how to tune up that amplifier to make it sound like a violin. It's a very good sound for jazz in my opinion. If Ray Nance and I record together, he and I are going to use the same amplifier, so we'll have the same balance. We've tried it, and he's in love with it. He could have benefited from it in Duke's band."

For many years, there were conflicting reports whether Smith and Nance had ever got to record together. Fortunately, they had, in 1964, though the album was never completed. The part-session was not released until the CD era, included on 4CD Mosaic MD4-186 *The Complete Verve Stuff Smith Sessions*. Unfortunately, insoluble licensing problems have led to the set's premature withdrawal, though examples occasionally turn up at auction.

As far as is known, Nance never went electric in the recording studio with Ellington but he did at least twice, and probably more often, in concert. He plays electric violin on "Honeysuckle Rose" recorded at a Fargo, North Dakota concert on 7 November 1940. *Metronome* (January 1941) reported "Duke Ellington uncorked a sensational replacement for Cootie Williams in the person of trumpeter-fiddler Ray Nance, who, playing 'Concerto for Cootie' on his electric fiddle, blew the top off Colgate University Memorial Chapel Thursday night, Dec. 12." The accompanying photo of this unrecorded concert shows Nance with what appears to be a conventional violin with pickup attached. The cable runs behind the violin, just as it does in early 1940s photos of Smith and Perry; in other words, the cable does not plug into the front center bout as it does on the late 1930s Vio-Lectric. Fascinating that Nance featured violin, rather than trumpet, in homage to Cootie Williams whom he had replaced just weeks before; and regrettable that no recording is known. One latter-day album that features a very electric Nance is Chico Hamilton's *Headhunters* for Solid State in 1969.

But we are running ahead. Our overview of the earliest electric jazz violinists, in which Stuff Smith turns out to be the only one with a life-long commitment to amplification, properly stops with the 1950s. From the turn of the decade there is a new story to be told about the development and use of electric violins. It begins in 1958 with the first production solid-body Fender, favored, according to Ben Heaney, by Western Swing fiddlers Wade Ray and Harold Hensley (there exist home recordings of Smith with Hensley along with Buddy Ray, Billy Wright, Jimmy Bryant) but which no jazz violinist appears to have taken up, and the introduction of the Barcus-Berry transducer in the 1960s.

Tail Piece

Among other early possible uses of electric jazz violin on recordings are two Chicago curiosities. A December 1947 session by Earl Hines, which includes Eddie South, for Mercer Ellington's Sunrise label (not to be confused with another Hines Sunrise session with South plus Hampton musicians the same month) and an early 1950s session by Leon Abbey for Parrott. Although South is not known ever to have played amplified violin, it is just possible that he and Abbey do so on these recordings. The trouble is, audio fidelity on both sessions is poor; the Hines session, in particular, is boxy and muddy. Whether South's unusual tone on "Dark Eyes" and "Honeysuckle Rose" is partly the result of an electric instrument or solely the result of studio and recording acoustics is a moot point, though one suspects the latter. Much the same can be said of 1946 Pittsburgh recordings by Joe Kennedy Jr. The two Hines recordings with South have frequently been reissued,

though with incorrect personnel details. One of the two Abbey recordings and the four Kennedy recordings are released on 2CD AB Fable ABCD2-011/12 *I Like Be I Like Bop*, an anthology of early bebop violin.

Acknowledgements

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Related Reading

links were active in 2006 and some may no longer be active

Hugh Davies, "Electronic Instruments: Bowed Strings", *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (New York, 1984)

Hanno Graesser with Andy Holliman, *Design and Technique of Electric Bowed Stringed Instruments* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), German and English text

F. H. & V. "Le Violon électrifié", *L'Illustration* (Paris, 12 Avril 1930), description of le violon Makhonine

Benedict Heaney, Digital Violin: *The Story of the Electric Violin* http://www.digitalviolin.com

Andy Holliman, *Electric Strings* http://www.electricstrings.com

John Schussler, *Bowed Electricity* http://www.lightbubble.com/bowed

D. Blaise Kielar, *Electric Violin Shop* http://www.electricviolinshop.com

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The original SP–AB Fiddle Sessions articles and responses are archived at Internet Archive Wayback Machine

AB Fable: Violin Improvisation Studies

http://www.abar.net