



Title: The Legacy of Alex Welsh

Author/Editor: Roger Craik

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THE LEGACY OF ALEX WELSH

BY ROGER CRAIK

It is now over a quarter of a century since the death of Alex Welsh. The bands that he led thrilled, inspired and charmed audiences in Britain and overseas for three decades, starting from the early fifties. Fortunately, he and the band in its various combinations have left us with many excellent recordings which confirm just how consistently good they were. Many of those documents are presently available; so perhaps it is a good time to remind ourselves of this legacy.

Alex Welsh was born into a working class Edinburgh family on 9 July 1929. According to John Chilton (1), he attended Broughton Secondary School in the city where he played accordion. He took up cornet in his teens and was sufficiently proficient by age twenty-two to play locally with the future Mick Mulligan Band clarinettist Archie Semple (whom Alex would later hire), clarinettist Sandy Brown and the Nova Scotia Band (illus. 1). The drift towards London of the better Edinburgh professional players had started by the early fifties. Dave Keir, the then leader of the Nova Scotians, was to make the move to Mulligan's band in 1953 and Alex was soon to follow southwards. There is a fascinating tape, from the very early fifties, of a BBC Scottish Home Service broadcast featuring a band under Semple's name with Alex on cornet and Dave Keir on trombone. They play a programme of lively Chicago-style numbers. The die was already cast for the years to come.

THE FIRST CLASSIC BAND

The new London-based Welsh band can be heard in three titles from a concert at the Royal Festival Hall on 30 October 1954 and, again, from the same venue, in January 1955 (2). Various stalwarts of the Welsh band of the period are already in place: trombonist Roy Crimmins, pianist Fred Hunt and drummer Lennie Hastings, with George Melly as well as Alex

on vocals. Early in 1955, the classic Alex Welsh front line was completed by Archie Semple rejoining his Edinburgh friend. And so the classic recordings of the fifties commenced.

The band was a roaring success, both musically and financially. With Welsh's driving cornet, Semple, reminiscent of both Ed Hall and Pee Wee Russell, and the whole sound underpinned by Roy Crimmins, with a touch of Lou McGarity. Here was a group to take over and develop the British version of Chicago-style jazz, pioneered by Freddie Randall. How that early band sounded can be heard on the 2000 Lake release (3), "It has to Be...." bowling along like the classic New York City-based Commodore Records outfits of 1944.

But the Welsh band were more than mere imitators. Each of the front line soloists had his individual voice; Fred Hunt was a world class soloist in the idiom, while Lennie Hastings drove things along in a style well worthy of George Wettling and Cliff Leeman.

Up to this point, the band had been known as Alex Welsh and his Dixielanders, but, by the next batch of recordings, from 1957 onwards, it was Alex Welsh and his Band. The repertoire had also broadened to include swing and mainstream classics, while the rhythm was lighter (with Billy Lock, then Johnny Richardson, temporarily replacing Hastings). Notable albums from this period were the two 10" LPs

10" LPs, originally issued on Nixa: *From Dixieland to Duke* and *The Melrose Folio*. Re-issued on LP (4), and on CD (Lake LACD 92), titles include, *Good Queen Bess* and *Up Jumped You with Love*, as well as a beautiful *Winin' Boy Blues*.

I remember hearing the band for the first time in 1958 at a particularly rowdy student dance in Edinburgh, where the sheer exuberance of the band sound cut clean through the racket of the audience. Beryl Bryden was massively on vocals and the interval trio was led by pianist Dill Jones – great days!

But the band also had a gentle, lyrical side. Quite the best session from this time if not the best Welsh session of them all – came out in 1960 as *Music of the Mauve Decade* (5). As the title suggests, the music was meant to recapture the atmosphere of the Chicago gangster era of the 1920s and 30s. This it does, but not in the barnstorming unsubtle way of many a similar project.

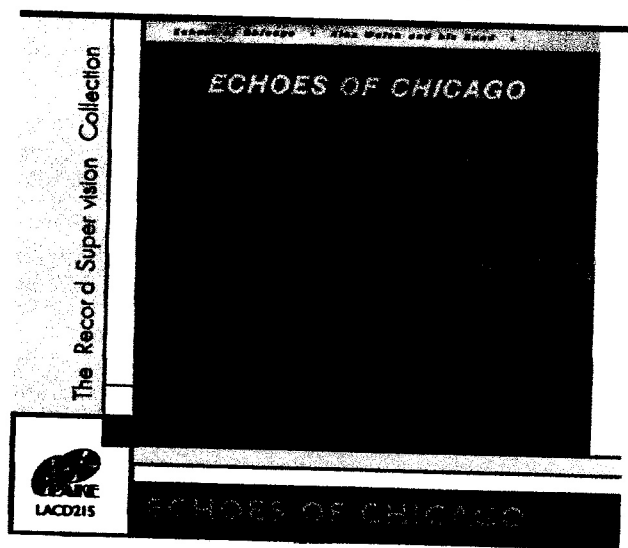
Firstly, the repertoire is unusual, including *Lonesome and Sorry* (popularised in 1926 by the bands of Jean Goldkette and Sam Wooding), *Don't Leave Me, Daddy* (introduced by Bee Palmer with Frankie Trambauer's Orchestra in 1929), and *Tell 'em about Me* (cut by Ethel Waters in 1924 and 1925). These were rarely

heard, before or since. Then, the usual instrumentation is varied by including guests Harry Gold on bass sax and Len Doughty on valve trombone. An atmosphere of relaxation and invention permeates the music. I cannot begin to number the times I've listened to this classic session on LP or CD.

Somewhat out of the usual run was the 1960 *Night People* (6), issued to feature the sensitive clarinet of Archie Semple as well as the more thoughtful side of Welsh; the disc includes ballads and originals by Semple, as well as non-Dixieland standards like, *I'll Get By* and *Lullaby of the Leaves*, a gem, with Fred Hunt in top form throughout. Jack Fallon, a leading session bassist of the time (Duke Ellington, Don Rendell, etc), lends the necessary harmonic pulse. All this at the peak of the 'trad' boom!

These joined other classic crews on the Columbia Lansdowne label, Denis Preston's project that would later include Joe Harriott and Acker Bilk. The Preston sessions were notable for the custom studio clarity of their reproduction as well as the thoughtful nature of their content. For the most part these sessions from the late fifties and early sixties were not re-issued for many years and became very hard to get. All credit then to Paul Adams of Lake Records who persisted in his negotiations with the licence holders to make these albums available to connoisseurs once again.

ALEX WELSH & HIS BAND



Have the musician's face on the LP, you're kidding?

A case in point, *Echoes of Chicago* (7), was recorded by the band in February 1962 and issued at that time. As sleeve writer Ralph Laing notes, it was deleted shortly afterwards and has never seen the light of day for the ensuing forty years! I recall seeing a copy in an electrical shop at the time and, lacking the necessary 32/6d [today: £28] or whatever, having to bypass it and I never found a copy again. All the more to applaud when Lake managed to re-issue it in 2005. 'Profitez-en', as they say in France and acquire it while you may.

Musically it is the antitheses of *Night People*: it is Chicago-style jazz at its roaring, rumbustious best. The regular front line is augmented by Danny Moss on tenor sax and Gerry Salisbury (an unsung minor genius of British jazz) on trombone - shades of Dick Carey! The 'rep' is well-worn enough

(*Strut Miss Lizzie, My Man, The Eel*) but the playing is chockfull of energy and invention. Another peak among the fine performances of the first Welsh band.

Unfortunately, that session was among the last peaks of that particular range. Shortly afterwards Archie Semple's health began to break down and he had to leave the band early in 1963. His fiery, sardonic inventiveness had been an essential element in Welsh sound. The original front line was further weakened by Roy Crimmins' leaving in 1965 to lead his own band in Germany. The original era of the Alex Welsh band was over. What was needed was a new fresh sound.

PHASE II

To replace two first-rate front line players is a major undertaking, as any bandleader will confirm. To replace them with three was achievement indeed. But this is what Alex Welsh managed by bringing Roy Williams, John Barnes and Al Gay into the band. These three were among the brightest stars of the younger British mainstreamers. Roy Williams was twenty-eight when he joined the band from Terry Lightfoot's in 1965. His light, agile, melodic style was to grace the Welsh band for the next thirteen years. John Barnes had been with the Mike Daniels and Alan Elsdon bands before coming into the Welsh fold in 1964. His versatility on various reeds and his ability to share the vocal chores with Alex were to be in evidence until 1977. Al Gay perhaps lesser known than the other two, is still a top tenor in the mainstream mould. He had wide experience, with Joe Daniels, Bobby Mickleburgh and Freddie Randall - a roll-call of the British Dixieland scene. Gay seems to have been used on an 'as and when' required basis, but enhances the front line on many of the band's subsequent recordings, as Danny Moss had done in the past.



The Phase II band, with the three or four piece front line, made a series of excellent recordings in the late sixties. *Strike One* (1966) (8), *At Home with Alex Welsh* (1967) (9) and *Alex Welsh and his Band* (1969) (10), all show the fresh approach to the

repertoire, imported by the new players. Alongside the old favourites like *Louisiana* and *Oh, Baby!* The band was playing standards of the thirties: *I Wished on the Moon*, *9.20 Special* and *It Don't Mean a Thing*.

The 1966 session also produced the first recording of the Alex Welsh/Fred Hunt classic duo on *Davenport Blues* – a firm favourite over the years. These late sixties recordings have a sparkling vitality and drive, but, so far as I know, the latter two have not been re-issued on CD.

On *Saturday Night* some 18,000 people were present by the tune Alex Welsh had finished playing for seventy-five minutes. Nothing but admiration was expressed for the group on all sides” Thus, Stanley Dance in *Lightly and Politely* in the *Jazz Journal* of August 1968, reporting on the Welsh band's performance at that year's Newport Jazz Festival. The band then went on to back Ruby Braff, Bud Freeman, Pee Wee Russell and Joe Venuti. So, a career highlight for Alex and the band. And quite a contrast to the situation ten years before, in May 1958, when Alex told a rather patronising *Melody Maker* reporter that he had declined Jack Teagarden's offer of a place in 'Big T's band because he didn't feel good enough! For whatever reason, it was fortunate for British jazz that Alex stayed with us.

With the now well established Phase II front line, the Welsh band in the early seventies, made a series of fine 'in concert' recordings. Most of these appeared on the Black Lion or Polydor labels and have had a chequered re-issue history since.

The first concert was billed as the 'Melody Maker Tribute to Louis Armstrong' (11) and was recorded at the Queen Elizabeth Hall in London to mark Louis' seventieth birthday. Apart from the popular Welsh band of the time there were featured spots for George Chisholm, Lennie Felix, Humphrey Lyttleton (who was also the compere) and Beryl Bryden with her trusty washboard. Given the concert format the material was patchy, but with some great moments. An exuberant *Oh Baby* sticks in mind. As an 'oddy' there was a two trumpet *Fanfare for Louis* composed by Malcolm Arnold and played by two classical players, Elgar Howarth and Steve Woods.

Louis died on 6 July 1971 and his passing was marked by another Queen Elizabeth Hall concert, this time billed as a Memorial Concert featuring Alex Welsh and his friends (12). The friends were, once more, Humph and George Chisholm, plus Bruce Turner. The latter distinguished himself on an extended version of *Rocking Chair*, on clarinet.

Perhaps the most renowned concert of the period was that recorded in Dresden (13) on 14 October 1971. This caught the band (Alex, Roy Williams, Johnny Barnes, Fred Hunt, Jim Douglas, Harvey Weston and Lennie Hastings) in top form. Staples of the current repertoire were featured, along with one or two novelty numbers (*Dapper Dan*, *If I Had a Talking Picture of You*) to leaven the mix for the non-jazz fans. That apart, the tight swing of the rhythm section behind Fred Hunt on *Oh, Baby*, is enough to lift the leaden heart. And to show that the Dixieland roots of the band had not been deserted, one of the most effective numbers was a lively, inventive *Maple Leaf Rag*. As an additional bonus, on the double LP Black Lion issue at least, Digby Fairweather's affectionate sleeve note gives a highly informative summary of the band's history up to that time.

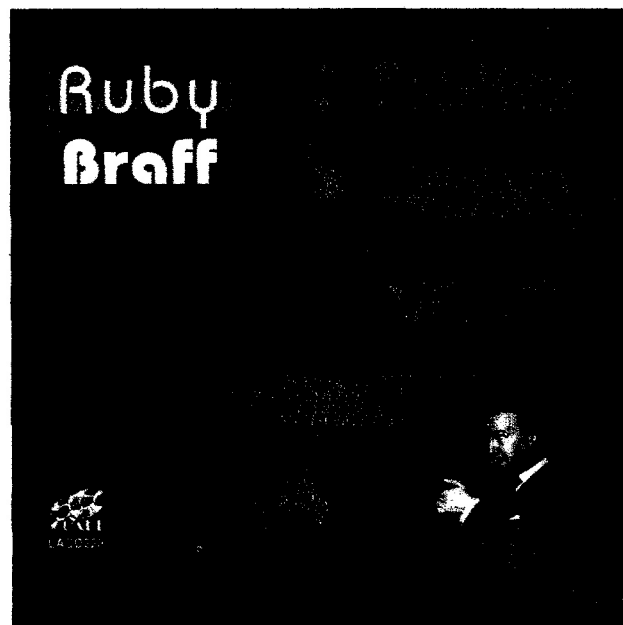
Apart from Alex himself, the two veterans of the original band were, of course, Lennie Hastings and Fred Hunt. It is fortunate for us that the last two recordings mentioned caught the band in late 1971, for, by early 1972, Lennie Hastings was forced to leave the band through illness and, in 1974, Fred Hunt left to

lead his own trio. Before he did so, the 1973 band (with Roger Nobes on drums) was captured in sessions released as the *Alex Welsh Band Showcase* (14). Those recordings once more emphasised the mainstream path the band was taking with titles such as Johnny Hodges' *Swingin' the Blues Away* and *Big Swing Face*, originally featured by the Buddy Rich Big Band. All tasty stuff!



Wild Bill Davison (left) and Alex

Fred Hunt might have seemed to be irreplaceable, but Brian Lemon, who took over the piano chair, in his own way, gave the band the light swinging touch and necessary harmonic foundation which were required. The answer was in fact B. Lemon!



Over the years and particularly in the middle 1960s, the Welsh band had the pleasant task of backing visiting American stars on tour. Many of these sessions, unavailable at the time, have recently surfaced from venues where they had been recorded (Manchester Sports Guild, Dancing Slipper, Nottingham) or from contemporaneous BBC broadcasts. Of these the most successful, to my mind, were those with Wild Bill, (17, 18) Ruby Braff (16) and Peanuts Hucko (19, 20). Each of those stars was in his prime at the time of the recordings.

Bruff's laid-back phasing fitted well into the relaxed rhythm of the band. Wild Bill acted as a supercharger, while Peanuts Hucko, obviously pleased and inspired by the group, plays as well as he did in the classic mid fifties Eddie Condon sessions.

The band rhythm section of April 1967 (Hunt, Douglas, Ronnie Rae and Hastings) also backed Ben Webster, Bill Coleman, Lockjaw Davis, Bud Freeman and Eddie Miller in various studio sessions (25, 26, 27). Finally, on the LP *Jazz Means Hines* (28), a title coined by the late, lamented, Ad-man and band leader, Archie Sinclair, the rhythm section, plus Alex and Johnny Barnes on two tracks, accompany a virtuoso Earl Hines in a May 1966 session. Mention should also be made, while dealing with the late sixties-early seventies, of a set of BBC Jazz Club recordings of the band on Upbeat URCD 191: *Just One More Chance*.

The early seventies were still halcyon days for the Phase II band. However, bleaker times were ahead. Work and recording opportunities appear to have diminished. So too did Alex's health. His descent into alcoholism was documented in a remarkable 1994 radio documentary: *The Lemonade King*, broadcast after his death. As recounted there, from an early background of teetotalism, the strains of leading and keeping a band together led to Alex becoming increasingly dependent on vodka as a prop.

As John Chilton dispassionately puts it: 'During the late seventies and early eighties his health began to fail and he was forced to disband for several months'. Despite this, there are two late broadcasts on record (29) from December 1979 and October 1981, where the band still sounds fresh and swinging. On these tracks Alex has been rejoined by Roy Crimmins, Al Gay and Fred Hunt, and stalwarts such as Jim Douglas and Roger Nobes in the rhythm section. He plays and sings as ever on *I'm Confessin'* on the 1981 session and his trumpet feature: *Just One More Chance*, is still glorious.

But the renaissance was not to last. I can recall hearing the band at then at an Edinburgh Jazz Festival gig. Alex had shrunk in both sound and stature. Compared to that glorious sound heard in 1958, this band sounded thin and weary. Pianist Brian Lemon indicated that Alex was not well. But as Chilton records, the big-hearted trumpeter continued to play until within two weeks of his death on 25 June 1982.

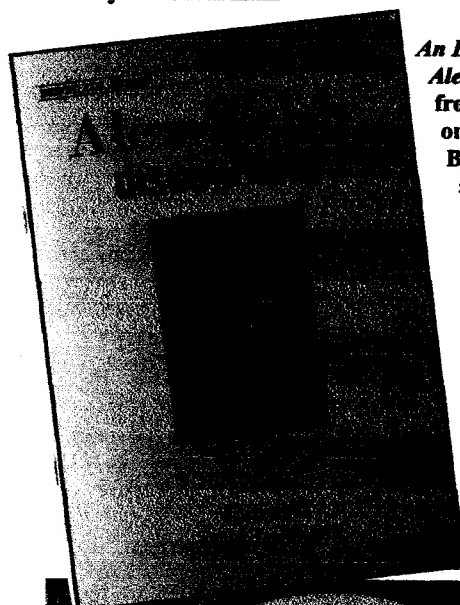


So that was Alex gone, but certainly not forgotten. Chief among his protagonists remains Digby Fairweather, who recalled with affection the many kindnesses and acts of encouragement, Alex showed to him as a young trumpeter (1c). And musicians who had known and played with him formed the Alex Welsh Legacy Band, which can be heard playing his repertoire with great gusto in an IAJRC Hamburg concert in 1999 (30).

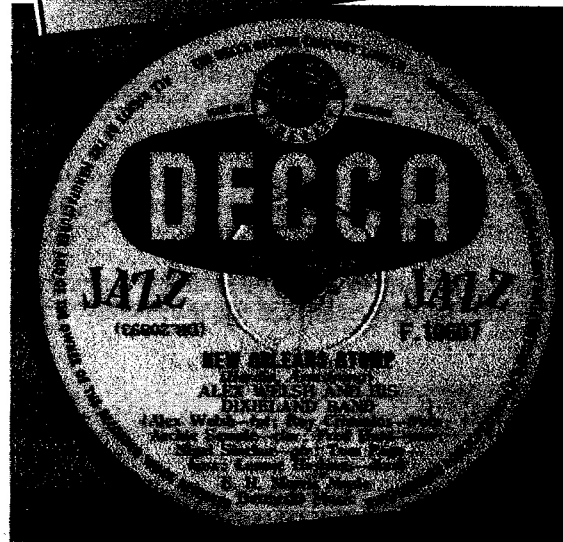
But more than memories linger on. There are the glorious sounds on disc of the first band with Archie Semple and Roy Crimmins, still as fresh as ever. And with Phase II, the melodies and excitement continue right up to the end. At present there is probably more of Alex Welsh's music available on record than ever. Catch that wonderful swinging sound while you can!

Gerard Bielderman's *Alex Welsh Discography*, just one of a large series of valuable artist-specific discogs; full list via : Lele 18, 8032 ZG Zwolle, Netherlands, home.tiscali.nl/tradjazz,

An early shellac on Decca, *New Orleans Stomp*, recorded 1955 at the Royal Festival Hall.



An Evening with Alex Welsh, also live, from 1971 and issued on Polydor 2460 179, Black Lion BLP 12112 and, in Germany, on Intercord 28443-OU / 127020



REFERENCE BOOKS

- 1a) Gerard Bieklerman : *Alex Welsh Discography* (Zwolle: Eurojazz Discos, 1990)
- 1b) John Chilton : *Who's Who of British Jazz* (Cassell, 1997; Continuum, 2004) - An invaluable work.
- 1c) Digby Fairweather : *Notes from a Jazz Life* (Northway Publications, 2002)

REFERENCE AUDIO

CDs unless noted otherwise

- 2) Lake LACD 8: *Live at the Royal Festival Hall 1954-1955*
- 3) Lake LACD 145: *It Has To Be* (1955)
- 4) Dormouse DM7 [LP] and Lake LACD 92: *Dixieland to Duke / The Melrose Folio* (1957)
- 5) Lake LACD 62: *Music of the Mauve Decade* (1959)
- 6) Lake LACD 187: *Archie Semple-Alex Welsh* (1960)
- 7) Lake LACD 215: *Echoes of Chicago* (1961-1962)
- 8) Lake LACD 107: *Strike One* (1966)
- 9) Columbia SCX 6213 [LP]: *At Home with Alex Welsh* (1967)
- 10) Columbia SCX 6333 [LP]: *Alex Welsh and his Band '69*
- 11) Jazz Colours 874767-2, 874768-2 (1970?)
- 12) Black Lion 760515: *Louis Armstrong Memorial* (Queen Elizabeth Hall, 1971)
- 13) Black Lion 760503: *Classic Concert* (1971)
- 14) Black Lion BLP 12120, 12121 [LPs]; BLCD 760503 : *Band Showcase* (Vols 1 & 2, 1973)
- 15) Jazzology 318: *Henry 'Red' Allen w/AW* (Manchester Sports Guild, March 1966)
- 16) Lake LACD 223: *w/ Ruby Braff* (The Dancing Slipper, Nottingham, Summer, 1967)
- 17-
- 18) Jazzology JCD 201: *Wild Bill Davison w/AW*, December 1966; and Jazzology 231: *Wild Bill Davison w/Alex Welsh - Fidgety Feet* (both at the Manchester Sports Guild, October 1967)
- 19-
- 20) Lake LACD 171 and 175: *AW w/ Peanuts Hucko at Manchester Sports Guild* (Vols 1 & 2, May, 1967)
- 21) Jazzology JCD 298: *Eddie Miller w/AW* (April, 1967)
- 22) Lake LACD 157 : *AW w/ Pee Wee Russell* (Manchester Sports Guild, November, 1964)
- 23) Upbeat URCD 193: *Bones for the King, w/ Dicky Wells & Bud Freeman* (BBC, July, 1966)
- 24) Jazzology JCD 345: *Rex Stewart w/AW* (May, 1966)
- 25) Fontana STL 5453: *Ben Webster w/ AW - Tenors of Jazz* [LP] (April, 1967); Fontana SFJL 916: *Americans in Europe* [LP]
- 26) Black Lion BLP 30127 [LP]: *Swingin' in London*
- 27) Fontana TL 5415 [LP]: *Jelly Roll Morton Seven*
- 28) Fontana TL 5378 [LP]: *Earl Hines with AW* (1966)
- 29) Upbeat URCD 175: *Oh, Baby!* (1979)
- 30) Nagel-Heyer CD 070: *Alex Welsh Legacy Band*

Broadcast recordings of the first band are also available on :
 GB Records 118 (September 1958)
 Upbeat URCD 122: *Best of British Jazz from the BBC, V.4* (Feb 1960)
 Upbeat URCD 169: *At the Jazz Band Ball* (November 1962)

Illustrations used courtesy of the author and Lake Records.

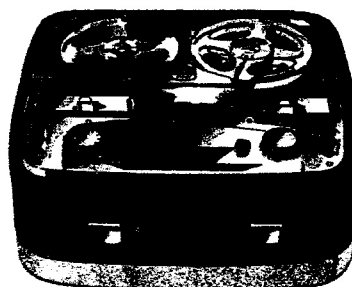
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SPOTLIGHT ON AUDIO HIGHLIGHTS

- | | |
|------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| No. 11 | Artie Shaw, CJRT Toronto, Nov. 1984 |
| No. 23 | Benny Goodman, BBC interview. with Peter Clayton, ca. 1970s. |
| No. 29 | Mary Lou Williams, interview with Sonny Buxton, n.d. |
| No. 30 | Michel Petrucciani Concert, Dec. 1994. |
| Nos. 32-33 | Gary Crosby's Jazz Jamaica, BBC Dec 1994-Jan 1995. |
| No. 43 | Sonny Rollins documentary, BBC, n.d. |
| No. 48 | Gene Harris of The 3 Sounds, at the Concorde Club, Eastleigh, UK. |
| No. 72 | Phil Woods, interview with Campbell Burnap, BBC July 1995. |
| No. 80 | Art Ensemble of Chicago, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, Dec 1995. |
| No. 84 | Bobby Watson & Tailor Made Band, Glasgow Jazz Fest, 1994. |
| No. 85 | Al Bowlly documentary, BBC, n.d. |
| No. 104 | Alvin Alcorn - New Orleans Jazz + Don Ewell's Biscayne Jazz Band, PBS-TV. |
| No. 119 | Ross Russell, interviewed by Leonard Feather & Gerald Wilson Show, KBCA-FM, Los Angeles. |
| No. 122 | Hermeto Pascoal Big Band, Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, 1994. |
| No. 124 | Celtic Swing - Van Morrison with the BBC Big Band, Edinburgh Jazz Fest 1995. |
| No. 125 | Freddy Hubbard, interviewed by Digby Fairweather, BBC August 1996. |

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Fred Hofmann
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