

STEREO 9348 RIVERSIDE

HARLEM BANJO!

ELMER SNOWDEN QUARTET FEATURING CLIFF JACKSON

The extremely high-spirited and vivacious music heard in this album is as much the music of the '60s as it was of the '20s. Not a re-creation, this is the actual HARLEM BANJO of veteran band leader *Elmer Snowden*, whose early bands were proving grounds for such as Count Basie, Duke Ellington, Chick Webb and many other jazz greats. Adding immensely to the spirit and rhythmic drive of these recordings is the ever-fresh stride piano of *Cliff Jackson*.



1. IT DON'T MEAN A THING (IF IT
AIN'T GOT THAT SWING) 2:43
(Ellington-Mills) Mills Music, Inc.-ASCAP
2. DOIN' THE NEW LOWDOWN 3:30
(Fields-McHugh) Mills-ASCAP
3. RUNNIN' WILD 3:27
(Gibbs-Grey) EMI Feist Catalog/Cromwell
Music-ASCAP
4. DIGA DIGA DOO 2:23
(Fields-McHugh) Mills-ASCAP
5. THEM THERE EYES 2:50
(Tracey-Tauber-Pinkard)
Bourne Co.-ASCAP
6. TISHOMINGO BLUES 4:09
(Spencer Williams) E.B. Marks-BMI
7. C-JAM BLUES 2:55
(Duke Ellington) EMI Robbins Catalog-ASCAP
8. SWEET GEORGIA BROWN 3:21
(Bernie-Pinkard-Casey) Warner Bros.
Music-ASCAP
9. ALABAMY BOUND 2:06
(Green-DeSylva-Henderson) Shapiro,
Bernstein & Co., Inc./Holiday Publ./Ray
Henderson Music-ASCAP
10. TWELFTH STREET RAG 3:35
(Bowman-Razaf) Shapiro Bernstein/Jerry
Vogel Music Co.-ASCAP
11. BUGLE CALL RAG 3:56
(Schoebel-Meyers-Pettis) Mills Music/Edwin H.
Morris-ASCAP
12. DEAR OLD SOUTHLAND 2:42
(Layton-Creamer) Mills-ASCAP

ELMER SNOWDEN—banjo
CLIFF JACKSON—piano
TOMMY BRYANT—bass
JIMMY CRAWFORD—drums

Produced by CHRIS ALBERTSON

Recorded in New York City;
December 9, 1960.

Recording engineer—Ray Fowler
(Plaza Sound Studios)

Digital remastering, 1990—Phil De Lancie
(Fantasy Studios, Berkeley)

Cover designed by Ken Deardoff

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The exuberant, rollicking music in this album, although not "modern" jazz, is nevertheless quite *contemporary* jazz. It typifies the fabulous Harlem rent-party spirit of the 1920s. And this LP serves to emphasize, through these happy musical examples, the fact that today—when so many modernists are seeking inspiration from the older forms of jazz—many of the musicians who originated and developed those forms are still active (although, in too many cases, far too infrequently recorded).

ELMER SNOWDEN contributed greatly to jazz in its earlier days and is responsible for launching the careers of many top musicians. But Snowden himself has been sadly neglected, receiving only brief mention in jazz histories, and this album actually marks his first appearance as leader on a record date.

All selections here are taken from the early repertoire of the Duke Ellington band, a choice that underlines the extremely important role played by Elmer at the outset of Duke's career. Elmer Chester Snowden was born in Baltimore on October 10, 1900. His musical life began only nine years later, when the father of a mandolin-playing friend taught him the rudiments of guitar. Elmer and his friend were soon giving street-corner and barber-shop performances as a guitar-mandolin duo. In 1912, when he was invited to join Eubie Blake's band, Snowden switched to the banjo-mandolin. His next job was as accompanist for silent movies; then in 1918 pianist Calude Hopkins heard him and hired him for his band. The following year saw Elmer, still not out of his teens, leading his own group in Washington, D.C. There were many fine young players in that city at the time, and Snowden soon formed a new eight-piece group that included such local talent as Otto Hardwicke, Arthur Whetzel and, occasionally, drummer Sonny Greer—who was then also half of a duo led by a young ragtime-inspired pianist named Edward Kennedy Ellington.

In June, 1923, acting upon the advice of Fats Waller, Elmer packed up and left for New York City, taking

along Hardwicke, Whetzel and Greer. Waller was supposed to join them, but when they hit the big city, Fats was nowhere to be found. To remedy the situation, Snowden immediately telegraphed Ellington, who came up the following day. But the bookings they had originally been guaranteed were based on the presence of Waller, who even then had somewhat of a name in New York; no one had ever heard of Elmer or his young pianist, and no one had a job for them. "We did a lot of rehearsing," Elmer recalls, "but we were splitting hot dogs five ways."

From this inauspicious start, however, stemmed one of the more fascinating sagas in the colorful jazz lore of Prohibition-era New York. For one day towards the end of July, with all hope seemingly gone, Elmer ran into singer Ada Smith (later a successful club-owner in Rome and better known as "Bricktop"). Ada had good connections, and succeeded in getting Elmer Snowden's Washingtonians a job at Barron Wilkins' place in Harlem. This meant something like fame and fortune, for although the band subsisted entirely on tips, generous gangsters who frequented the place enabled Elmer and his men to count on at least \$100 a week apiece. The Washingtonians quickly gained a reputation, and in September opened downtown at the swank Hollywood Club, on Broadway. They had been playing there for about a year, Elmer recalls, when the owners told them to be sure to take their instruments home when they left that night. Rather than carry all that weight (Snowden was also playing baritone sax by then), they chose to store them in a back room, a decision they soon came to regret. For a fire destroyed the Hollywood that night. A few months later it reopened as the Kentucky Club, and Elmer's Washingtonians returned to work. This engagement came to an end early in 1925 when there was another fire. ("We took their advice this time and saved our horns," Elmer notes.)

At this point, Ellington took over leadership of the Washingtonians and Elmer organized another group, but in August, 1926, the owners of the Kentucky club order-

ed him to join Duke as a sideman. "One didn't mess with those guys," Elmer notes, so he promptly obliged, placing guitarist Bernard Addison in charge of his own band. In December of 1927, after still another fire, Elmer went back to head his own band, while forming a new one for the Bamville Club. Unable to be in two places at once, he put the new band, "Snowden's Westerners," under the leadership of Cliff Jackson (who muses that "none of us had been further West than Newark").

Among the young musicians who worked in Elmer's various groups around 1927 were Count (then Bill) Basie, Jimmie Lunceford, Bubber Miley, "Tricky Sam" Nanton, Frankie Newton, Benny Carter and Chick Webb! In 1928 and '29 he led a band at the Hot Feet Club in Greenwich Village that (finally) had Fats Waller in it; Rex Stewart and Jimmy Harrison were among the members of Snowden's Nest Club band during 1930. But undoubtedly his most star-studded single band was the one he led at Small's Paradise in Harlem from 1931 to '33. This group, which included Roy Eldridge, Sid Catlett, Dickie Wells, Gus Aiken and Al Sears, also made several movie shorts for Warner Brothers.

Through a strange set of circumstances, including one recording ban, none of Elmer's bands were recorded, thus leaving a most regrettable gap in the history of recorded jazz. Elmer himself, however, was profusely recorded on almost every New York label from 1923 on. But he was hardly ever given name credit, except for two 1925 sides on which he accompanies the great Bessie Smith, and six sides with the Sepia Serenaders, recorded on December 14, 1934 and probably his last banjo recordings until the present album was made, more than a quarter-century later.

Since the mid '30s, Snowden has lived in relative obscurity, first in New York and later in Philadelphia, but he has always managed to remain active as a musician although forced to take menial jobs from time to time. To this day Elmer continues to foster jazz talent and many young modernists, such as Sahib Shahab, Ray and

Tommy Bryant and others, have gained valuable experience from close association with the veteran jazzman. This writer first came into contact with Elmer after playing some of his old records on a Philadelphia radio show. Elmer, who was working as a parking lot attendant at the time, sent me a cheerful letter of thanks and I soon arranged for him to play for me. The plans for this album actually began to form there and then, for Elmer revealed a remarkable gift for making his banjo swing, an ability which he superbly demonstrates on this record.

Cliff Jackson, whose infectiously rhythmic and hard-pounding piano is in the great tradition of Fats Waller and James P. Johnson, shares solo honors with Elmer on this album. He also shared the solos with Elmer on that Sepia Serenaders date in '34. And he has similarly been neglected by the recording companies of late. Cliff was born in Washington, D.C. on July 19, 1902 and has lived in New York since '23, when he came up to join Lionel Howard's Musical Aces. During the '20s he accompanied such celebrated blues singers as Clara Smith, Viola McCoy and Sara Martin. During the late '40s and early '50s he was very active in clubs around New York, and perhaps his performances here will re-open the ears of club-owners to the fact that Cliff (as one musician commented after the record session) still plays "a whole lot of piano."

Tommy Bryant, youngest of the quartet, was born in Philadelphia in 1930. He played with Snowden from 1949 to '52, and has since been heard with Dizzy Gillespie, Charlie Shavers, Jo Jones, and his elder brother Ray Bryant. At the time of this recording, Jimmy Crawford was in the pit band of the Broadway musical "Gypsy," but his background lies primarily and extensively in jazz. Born in Memphis, Tenn., in 1910, Jimmy was a mainstay of the famous Lunceford band for a 13-year span that began in '29. He has also played and recorded with Basie, Gillespie, Benny Goodman, Ben Webster, Sy Oliver, Edmond Hall and many others.

—Chris Albertson

Notes reproduced from the original album liner.



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HARLEM BANJO!**

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(RLP-9348)

AAD

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TOTAL TIME 39:00

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