

# The Beryl Booker Story

Opal Louis Nations looks at the career of the jive combo pianist



Beryl Booker Trio circa 1954 - 1955. Beryl Booker (bottom), piano; Bonnie Wetzel (top left), upright bass; and Elaine Leighton (top right), drums. From the Opal Louis Nations Collection.

**P**ianist Beryl Booker came up at a time when few all-female jive combos held their own in a world dominated by males. In the area of jump and jive units, only the Sepia Tones and Four V's spring to mind. There were others - but only Beryl Booker dared cross the colour-bar. Her 1954 to 1955 trio included white musicians Bonnie Wetzel on upright bass and Elaine Leighton on drums.

It's amazing how similar Beryl Booker is to pianist Hazel Scott, who boogied the classics and married political activist Adam Clayton Powell. Scott, was born in Trinidad in 1920 and came to New York in 1924. Booker, was Scott's junior by almost three years. She was born in Philadelphia on 7th June, 1923 and first lived near the corner of 14th and Wallace Streets. Both Booker and Scott were child prodigies. Both were encouraged by their mothers to develop their talent. Both were able to watch the hands of other pianists and pick up a song note for note in its exact arrangement without prior practice. However, they were divided by 'class'. Scott's family were solidly middle class. Booker's bordered on being middle class.

Scott was the fifth child, the first to survive infancy. Booker had three sisters and four brothers. All four male siblings died before the age of fifteen. While Scott was auditioned at the Juilliard School of Music in 1928 and was awarded a six-year scholarship, Booker was packed off by her mother to The Wharton Settlement Trade School and encouraged to sing rather than play piano. But Booker developed a happy relationship with her tutors and fared quite well.

Her mother, Julia was a homemaker and extremely strong-minded. Julia and her husband Everett met in North Carolina before coming to Philadelphia. None of Booker's older sisters showed any interest in music. Two resented the fact that Beryl got all the attention (perhaps well-deserved as Beryl was beautiful as well as talented), but one became her lifelong friend and confidante who took her out to where popular black music was being played while Beryl was only a young child. Despite the music school training, Booker took pride in saying that she taught herself to play piano.

By the tender age of seventeen, Booker was playing at local Philadelphia night clubs. This did not sit well with her mother. Besides, she was underage. At one of many jam sessions she was noticed by Slam Stewart. By now she had developed a distinctive swing-styled piano. As her reputation spread, she was touted as being the next Mary Lou Williams. Booker played in Stewart's trio (with Julia's permission). John Collins strummed guitar while Stewart himself stroked bass with a bow and hummed his solos. Alternating with Rose Murphy, Booker played off and on with Stewart for five years. Stewart took Booker to New York where at that point musicians from everywhere lived and played.

Stewart introduced Booker to Arthur Leonard who was filming an all-black musical (except for drummer Gene Krupa) centering around two producers trying to win financial backing for their respective shows. The movie was called 'Boy! What A Girl' and starred The Slam Stewart Trio with Booker, Big Sid Catlett and His Orchestra, Eddie 'Lockjaw' Davis, Deek Watson and His Brown Dots (an Ink Spots spin-off group) plus a gang of comics, one of whom (Tim Moore) appeared in drag.

More eye-popping moments were encountered when Stewart and Booker jitterbugged with wild abandon, physical and sexual innuendos included. This only reinforced the belief held by decent white movie going society that African American performers were akin to a displaced tribe of jungle heathens.

However, most critics agreed that the seventy-minute film, released by Herald Pictures, was skillfully made. Less risqué excerpts of Booker (excluding the jitterbugging) plus a host of other artists are available on a Storyville collection entitled 'The Small Black Groups'.

In late 1946, Booker hooked up with Don Byas who had her share a session with pianist Tony Scott on a date for Gotham Records that netted the prerequisite four titles issued as Gotham 131 and 132. (and later reissued on an Onyx CD ORI217 entitled 'At Home With The Blues'.)

In New York, Booker was able to pick the cream of the crop to form her first Gotham City trio. She picked Mary Osborne on guitar and June Rotenberg on stand-up bass. Armed with an RCA Victor contract, the Booker Trio recorded three songs, one of which, 'Low Ceiling', made quite a bit of noise on the small combo scene. In 1947, Booker alternated between playing with her trio and Slam Stewart. Stewart, Collins and Booker cut one session for Bob Shad's Sittin In With label in mid-1948. This was quite a jump for Booker to be leader over Stewart. Three singles were issued in 1949.

Being a small, 'integrated' musical unit like the Beryl Booker Trio, they quite naturally came into contact with jump and jive combos like themselves, notably the Austin Powell Quintet, the Toppers and Cats and the Fiddle.

Booker sat in with the Toppers right after their Savoy session. This was during the six-year period they did not appear on wax. By then, founding members drummer and tenor Jimmy Springs, David Patillo, Emmett Mathews, second tenor and soprano sax, pianist, arranger, baritone singer Romaine Brown and bass singer and guitarist Steve Gibson had evolved into the Red Caps.

On the recording front Booker joined Count Basie and His Orchestra with Dinah Washington and Jimmy Rushing on the first of a handful of 'Royal Roost' Radio Broadcasts in New York City in September, 1948. Unlike the RCA Victor session with the trio, Booker simply played and left all the singing to Earl Warren and the two star soloists. The programme was issued on a Session album.

Three days later Booker sat in on a second Basie 'Royal Roost' concert with the same line up. Various parts of the broadcast were issued on the New York Spotlite label. The third Basie radio broadcast was recorded four days later and issued on the Alto label. Four songs emerged from the fourth concert on the Session label without the star-soloists. The final recorded



Beryl Booker and John Collins circa mid 1940s. From the Opal Louis Nations Collection.

'Royal Roost' Basie concert (on which Booker played as pianist only) took place on 25th September. Many of the tunes appeared on a host of labels including Alto and Jazz Archives.

With Basie, Booker cut one session for the American Forces Recording Service in New York City in November 1948 (Jubilee #310). Washington, Rushing and additionally Anita O'Day held forth on vocals. Booker's increasingly frantic work schedule led to a dose of pneumonia during plans for a European tour with the Toppers. This

forced her into a period of semi-retirement wherein she had to look after her mother Julia who had also taken sick.

By mid-1950, her career had picked up again. By now, Austin Powell's celebrated on-going jump and jive combo, the Cats and The Fiddle, had broken up. Powell immediately re-organised the group to fill a heavy work schedule. Only one original member remained, Johnny Davis, tenor and

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Cats and The Fiddle (aka Austin Powell Quintet) at the Rose Room, Hotel Majestic, Cleveland, Ohio, 6th November 1950. Courtesy Marv Goldberg.

conga drummer. New membership included Powell, guitar, and bassist Stanley Gaines, pianist Beryl Booker plus drummer, vocalist Dottie Smith who had been with the Harlemaires on Atlantic Records.

By April 1951 this group had evolved into The Austin Powell Quintet. Booker and the group cut one record for Decca. It must be noted that Booker kept her trio going all this time to assure that enough money was coming in to pay bills.

In late 1951 Booker formed a quintet with herself on vocals and piano, Budd Johnson on tenor and baritone sax, Don Elliott on keyboards and vibes, Slam Stewart, bass, and Charlie Smith, drums. The ensemble cut one session for Mercury in January 1952. This was Booker's first substantial recorded singing gig to date. She always felt that her playing eclipsed her singing and had up to this point resisted all offers. Three singles emerged plus an album recorded in March with a trio composed of Booker, John Collins on guitar and Oscar Pettiford on bass.



Beryl Booker Trio, circa 1946. Mary Osborne, guitar; June Rothenberg, stand-up bass; Beryl Booker, piano. From the Dan Kochakian Collection

Booker had arrived and she strived to do better by enlisting Miles Davis. Under the sobriquet Miles Davis with The Beryl Booker's Quintet she waxed four songs that surfaced on an album at a later date. These were all from a 'Birdland' Radio Broadcast featuring Booker and Davis with Don Elliott, vibes, Chuck Wayne, guitar, Clyde Lombardi, bass, and Connie Kay, drums. Booker traveled to Chicago in June 1952 to record with Dinah Washington and The Jimmy Cobb Orchestra on Mercury. She followed this with a Dinah Washington show appearing at The Regal Theatre with the All Star Trio featuring Jimmy Cobb on drums and Keeter Betts on bass.

In early 1953 Booker turned up playing behind singer Teddi King for Storyville. Teddi King sang in the style of Lee Wiley and starred in the movie 'Cool Canaries' with George Shearing.

Returning to Chicago a second time, Booker appeared on a February 1953 Mercury session for Dinah Washington with an eight-piece orchestra including Betts and Cobb on bass and drums. Booker then formed another trio, one that stuck with her for only a year. Bonnie Wetzel played upright bass and Elaine Leighton sat in on drums.

Unlike the Sepia Tones or 4 V's, who were all black, both Wetzel and Leighton were white. Having a mixed combo created a lot of problems, especially in the South. Booker was also plagued with bad luck and ill health which set her career on hold a few times. One of the trio's first long engagements was at Chicago's Blue Note Club along with Singleton Palmer's Dixieland Six. Another long-term engagement took Booker to The Embers Club in New York.

A trip to Los Angeles in October 1953 found Booker recording an album for Discovery with her trio. Billed as Beryl Booker and Her Piano, she made another stab at singing two songs on a four-song session for a Dale EP in early 1954, accompanied by the Beryl Booker Quartet composed of herself, John Collins, Slam Stewart and Mr. Skin on drums. As luck would have it, Booker got to travel to Europe on tour with Leonard Feather's Jazz Club U.S.A. with Billie Holiday and Her Jam Session Group. The first Verve recording date featured an all-star line-up which included Booker on piano, Buddy DeFranco, clarinet, Red Norvo, vibes, Jimmy Raney, guitar, Red Mitchell, bass, and Elaine Leighton, drums. Two recorded songs turned up from two concerts on this tour recorded in January 1954, one from a German radio broadcast and two songs from a concert given in Cologne, West Germany. The second song, 'Billie's Blues' is considered Booker's most intense piece of piano accompaniment.

The busy Jazz Club U.S.A. schedule took the entourage to Mustermesse in Basel, Switzerland where, on 4th February 1954, Booker was fortunate enough to get herself recorded. Musicians in attendance included Red Norvo, vibes, Jimmy Raney, guitar, Red Mitchell, bass, Buddy DeFranco, clarinet, Beryl Booker, piano, Elaine Leighton, drums, Sonny Clark also piano, and Carl Drinkard. Nine songs and two Leonard Feather announcements found their way onto a Verve album. While in Paris, she recorded again with Don Byas. Most of this material appeared on the French Vogue label. She then took her trio to Scandinavia before returning to New York to record an album for Cadence with Wetzel and Leighton.

In June 1954, Booker recorded with the Terry Pollard All Stars. The thirteen-member group was loaded with top talent including Clark Terry, Urbie Green, Lucky Thompson, Kenny Clark, Horace Silver, Percy Heath and Tal Farlow. Booker returned to Slam Stewart's outfit in 1955 and stayed with him until 1957.

In 1959 she made a second extensive tour of Europe with Dinah Washington. Although she continued to perform in public into the 1970s, she rarely if ever recorded. This was due to continuous poor health. She moved out to Berkeley, California in the late 1970s and died shortly thereafter at the age of fifty-eight on 30th September, 1978. Hazel Scott died from pancreatic cancer a little more than three years later.

With special thanks to Dan Kochakian, Kent Brown and Tom Lord

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Chicago Defender advert, 27th December, 1952 for a Dinah Washington show at The Regal, Theatre, Chicago. From the Dan Kochakian Collection.