

# The Story of The Sepia-Tones, Ginger Smock and Art Rupe's Juke Box Label

by Opal Louis Nations



The Sepia Tones at The Last Word, Los Angeles, 1944. Mata Ray, piano, Ginger Smock, violin and Nina Russell, organ. Courtesy Sherrie Tucker.

**F**emale musicians have always had to struggle and work twice as hard as their male counterparts to prove that they can be as good, if not better, players. Indeed, a welter of jazz historians exclude many of the fine and talented black, female musicians who have contributed significantly to the development of the blanket definition ascribed as 'West Coast Jazz', a genre for the most part passed off as white and male.

The truth is that male and female African American musicians have played in Los Angeles, in particular in the Central Avenue area, since the early migrations of the 1920s. Early on, women found that they were accepted when quietly seated at the piano bench off to the side of the band but were often ridiculed when opting to master the trumpet, sax or drums instead. Female Central Avenue-billed pianists of colour such as Hadda Brooks, Nellie Lutcher and Dorothy Donegan, found soloing in supper-clubs less of a hassle.

The Second World War did not produce a chronic shortage of talented male musicians, but it did make it easier for female aggregations like the Queens of Swing, the Sepia Tones or the handful of outstanding all girl orchestras to find employment. One woman to flaunt convention was trumpet whiz Clara Bryant, one of the few women to venture into Central Avenue clubs during the 1940s to participate in the celebrated jam sessions that included such luminaries as Sonny Criss and Wardell Gray.

One of Clara's friends and ardent admirers was Emma 'Ginger' Smock-Shipp, founder of the Sepia-Tones. Ginger was born in Chicago in 1920. At age six she was sent to be raised in Los Angeles by her father's sister. Ginger's aunt and uncle soon realized their charge's talent for music and supplied her with a baby-sized violin and tiny bow.

With her adoptive parents' encouragement, young Ginger became drawn to the music of the church. It was not long before she played Baptist

hymns to an assembled congregation. Her mastery of the violin advanced until on 12th May, 1931 she gave her first concert recital at the First AME Church in Los Angeles. Admission price was one dollar. Ginger continued to play at church regularly, right up to her recent demise.

A year later executives at Twentieth Century Fox, who had heard of the child prodigy 'Little Emma Smock', contacted her teacher. They wanted a girl violinist to play in a movie. Ginger's violin teacher came to her school and plucked her right out of class. News spread throughout the building. The school was proud to have such a talented student. All wished her the best of luck. But all was not well for little Ginger whose parentage included African-American, Irish and Creek Native American blood. Ginger played well. But pure, white parentage was the accepted norm. Racial mixing and racial ambiguity were extremely threatening to mainstream institutions. The snub was painful, but bravely Ginger continued on with her musical education which was financed with the help of benefits staged by friends and church groups.

At Jefferson High, while playing with the All-City Students Symphony, she won a music scholarship which enabled her to study under a reputable teacher. She was headed on a course which lead straight to the concert stage. She would have made it had it not been for her gradual change in musical interests. Ginger sat by her phonograph listening to the bands of Jimmie Lunceford and The Duke. She would pick up her violin and improvise to the music. She started playing her newly formed improvisations for the kids in the school orchestra, just for kicks. They liked what they heard. With added enthusiasm, she studied the recordings of Joe Venuti, Stuff Smith and Eddie South and took care not to plagiarize them, always trying to find her own style.

After leaving school, Ginger, who had retained her membership in the musicians' union, shelved all thoughts of becoming a fully professional musician and opted instead to work as a lithographer in a print-shop. One day the union called to ask if Ginger could sub for Stuff Smith who had walked out on his job. Days later Ginger found herself playing with noted pianist Betty Hall Jones.

Through the good graces of the returning Stuff Smith, Ginger's tenure with Betty lasted a week.

She was hooked and determined to make jazz music the better part of her life. This was a time when swing and boogie woogie were evolving into an entity that would be labeled by the trades as 'blues & rhythm'.

In late 1943, Ginger hooked up with boogie pianist Mata Roy and Hammond organist Nina Russell at the Last Word Club on Central Avenue. The trio went out as the Sepia-Tones. Whether Mata and Nina, as a duo, used the Sepia-Tones moniker before Ginger arrived on the scene or whether the three had decided on the name, is a matter of conjecture. The Sepia Tones, says Ginger, "played in a place that was very exclusive in its time called the Last Word. In fact, Nat Cole opened it. That's the club we followed him in. It had exclusive membership at first, then they finally opened the doors to the public. We had movie stars like Judy Garland hang out there every night. Cesar Romero and a bunch of others, too. They loved the atmosphere and privacy. Enjoyed the music and stuff."

The Last Word was owned by drummer/businessman Curtis Moseby who also had an interest in the legendary Club Alabam and long-time connections with club people in San Francisco through his old Apex Club involvement. The actual financing came from his wife who had money and owned a big beauty shop downtown. The Sepia Tones' theme song was Buddy Bernier's 'Poinciana' (a song of the tree) which sold big for Bing Crosby on Decca Records.

The group played it in Spanish triple meter, Bolero style. Songs in the Sepia Tones' repertoire included Gershwin's 'Rhapsody In Blue', Albert Ketelbey's 'In A Persian Market' and David Rose's 'Holiday For Strings'. Boogie stylings were the order of the day, and one can imagine such profound influences as Hadda Brooks' 'Swingin' The Boogie' in the way their material was being offered. "We ran the gauntlet", says Ginger. "We played classics and semi-classics to blues." Very little is known about Mata Roy, but Nina Russell, on the other hand, has a colorful and impressive documented history. Nina stayed in the music business for seventy years during which time she played piano and organ and sang with the likes of



Ginger Smock, 1966. Courtesy Sherrie Tucker



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Courtesy Sherrie Tucker

Duke Ellington, Count Basie and Ray Charles. She once subbed for another keyboard player at a club run by Al Capone's brothers in Chicago.

She went over so well there that Ralph Capone threatened to burn down the house where she lived with her mother if she quit her engagement. Towards the end of her life she appeared in clubs around Kalispell, Montana.

Ginger's tenure in the Sepia Tones lasted off and on for three years. In 1944 she appeared with the Jackson Brothers at the Say When Club at 900 Bush Street in San Francisco. The Say When was a ritzy joint next to the Balalaika Restaurant. A wealth of talent played the Say When - Harry the Hipster, Nellie Lutcher, Charlie Parker, Billie Holiday and Slim Gaillard, to name a few. Curtis Moseby was probably responsible for helping to get Ginger the gig. During her stay at the club she was heard by a talent scout from RCA Victor Records. The scout was impressed with her playing and set up a demo recording date.

Two numbers were put down at the session, 'Ochochonee,' described as a wild gypsy-ish vehicle, and Bob Russell's 1943 samba 'Brazil' (Aquarela do Brasil). The scout seemed satisfied, said little and split for RCA HQ. At RCA, the executive committee was impressed with Ginger's work and asked after her. "We've never heard anything like this. Who is it?" they remarked. "A coloured girl in San Francisco," replied the scout. "Aw, forget it. We've got Joe Venuti." And that was that.

Meanwhile back in Los Angeles, Art Rupe was searching around for talent to put on a brand new record label he wanted to launch. Having been employed by Bob Scherman's recently bankrupt Atlas diskery, Art, who had learned the ropes, now had ideas of his own. Seeking to promote popular black music he scoured Central Avenue's after hours clubs and found Mata and Nina of the Sepia Tones. During his research Art noticed an inordinate number of successful 'boogie' titled records, Lionel Hampton's 'Hamp's Boogie Woogie', 'Boogie Woogie Ball' by the Five Red Caps and Louis Jordan's 'Saxa-Woogie', to name a few. He also noticed that the prime movers of so-

called 'race' records were juke box operators. "Record boogie material and call your label Juke Box", he concluded. An added bonus was that juke box operators often doubled as wholesalers for tiny, independent labels like his own.

On 21st August, 1944 Art Rupe recorded 'Boogie #1', coupled with a classy ballad entitled 'Sophisticated Blues', at an unknown Los Angeles studio location. Filling in for Ginger was tenor sax/clarinet player Paul Howard. Howard, an accomplished musician, played with the Quality Serenaders, did session work around town and served as a union official, ending up as treasurer for Musicians Local 767 (which later amalgamated with Local 47, the whites-only union). Session man George Vann sat in on drums. Vann was drummer/vocalist with the Buddy Harper Orchestra who later made a smidgen of noise with their 1948 Jewel release of the moodily morbid 'Darkness Blues'. On the joyfully jumping 'Boogie #1' Howard plays both sax and clarinet in turn, and one can easily imagine the same musical abandonment being replicated note for note by Ginger's frenzied violin had she attended the session. After saving enough money to launch it, Art released 'Boogie #1'

five months after the recording session.

Sales seemed promising right from the start. But having doubts about the flipside, 'Sophisticated Blues', or in an effort to keep his product selling well, Art replaced the song with Mata Roy's 'When My Baby Comes Home' and reissued the 78, adopting the same release number. Then, as if having doubts about the switch, Art reinstated 'Sophisticated Blues'.

Together with topline 'Boogie #1', he reissued the original coupling once again to launch his new 500 series in November 1945. Collectors note that the matrix numbers on the first Sepia Tones' reissue are the same as those used for Art's second Juke Box release by bluesman, Roosevelt Sykes. The original was issued for the third and last time in August 1946 to launch his new and highly successful Specialty Records imprint. It is reported that 'Boogie #1' wound up selling 70,000 copies, thus providing enough capital for Art to continue pressing product. Sadly, the Sepia-Tones split up before Art got the chance to chase his good fortune with a follow-up.

In 1946 Ginger formed a group called Ginger and Her Magic Notes. The Magic Notes played the splashy Circular Kookanut Grove Restaurant in Santa Monica. The



Ginger Smock in Las Vegas, 28th October, 1993. Courtesy Sherrie Tucker.

Magic Notes danced, played, sang and entertained the joint's first class clientele. Ginger continued in show biz, on stage as well as radio, record and TV.

A second Sepia-Tones, this time altered to the Hollywood Sepia Tones, came about in 1951 when trumpeter Clora Bryant was working with the Queens of Swing. Through Benny Carter the Queens of Swing were able to star in a thirty-minute TV show. They were billed as 'The Hollywood Sepia Tones' (Clora Bryant, trumpet, Ms. Willie Lee Terrell, guitar, Anna Glascoe, bass, Gene Ramsey, bass, and Mattie Watson drums). The programme ran for six weeks and yes, believe it or not, the gals had just played the Last Word on Central Avenue.

Ginger Smock is believed to have died sometime in 1995.

With invaluable help from Professor Sherrie Tucker, Assistant Professor of American Studies, University of Kansas.

**PRINCIPAL SOURCES:**

'Swing Shift - All Girls Bands of the 1940s' by Sherrie Tucker (Duke University Press (2000)); 'Central Avenue Sounds - Jazz in Los Angeles' by Clora Bryant and others, (Univ. of California Press (1998)); 'Jazz Queens of Montana' - (Modern Maturity Magazine - January-February 1997); Earl Watkins' recollections of the wartime supper club scene in San Francisco by Opal Louis Nations (unpublished article 2001); 'West Coast Women - A Jazz Genealogy' by Sherrie Tucker (Pacific Review of Ethnomusicology, Vol. 8, # 1, Winter 1996/97); Ginger Smock interview conducted at The Excalibur Hotel in Las Vegas by Sherrie Tucker in October 1993; 'Ginger Smock' by Sherrie Tucker (Jazz Now - October 1994); Liner notes to 'The Specialty Story' by Billy Vera (Specialty Box Set 5 SPCD 4412-2 (1994)); 'The Hollywood Beat' DownBeat Section, (La. News, 6/15/1951 by Hal Holly)



Label shot: Opal Louis Nations

**SEPIA-TONES RECORDINGS:**

UR 100A	Boogie #1*	Juke Box 100	(1/45)
*recorded August 21st, 1944			
UR 100C	Sophisticated Blues	Juke Box 100	(1/45)
UR 100A	Boogie #1	Juke Box 100	(6/45)
UR 100B**	When My Baby Comes Home	Juke Box 100	(6/45)
** B-side ascribed to Mata Roy			
Note: UR 100 A&B also used for The Blues Man/Roosevelt Sykes - Juke Box 101 release			
JB 502A	Boogie #1	Juke Box 500	(11/45)
JB 502B	Sophisticated Blues	Juke Box 500	(11/45)
SP 500A	Boogie #1	Specialty 500	(8/46)
SP 500B	Sophisticated Boogie	Specialty 500	(8/46)

**EMMA 'GINGER' SMOCK**

Emma 'Ginger' Smock violin; Edna Williams, trumpet, Vivian Garry, bass/leader, Wini Beatty, piano, Dody Jeshke, drums.

A Woman's Place Is In The Groove	Bluebird 6755-2	1946
Body And Soul	Bluebird 6755-2	1946