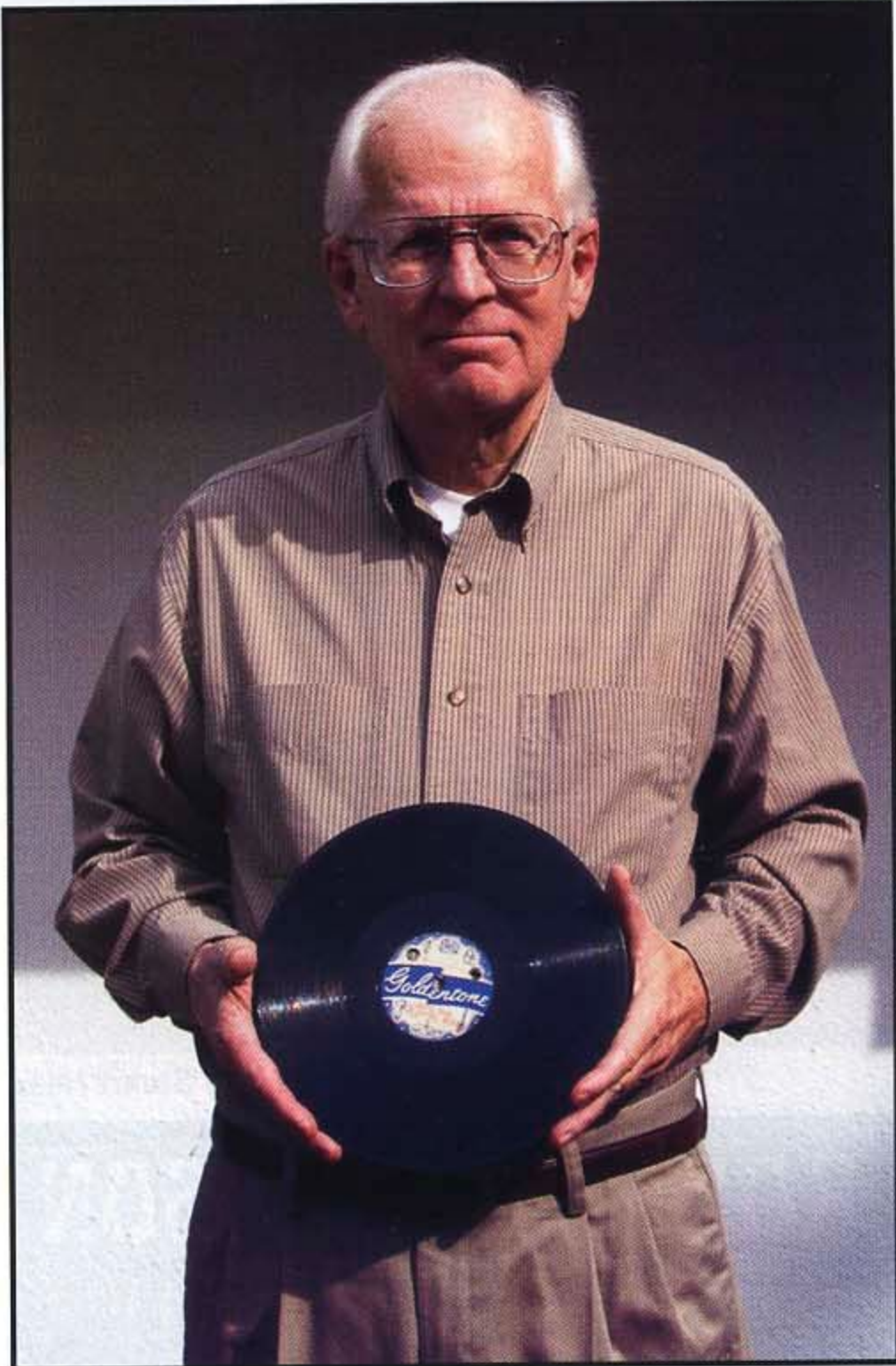


The Jaxyson Records Story

Blues and Gospel From Oakland's 'Black Broadway'

By Opal Louis Nations



Dick Bass holding one of the Jaxyson test pressings he bought at a swap meet. Photo: Ellen Nations

Like the Filmore and Tenderloin in San Francisco, Oakland's Seventh Street corridor (particularly the west end of it) was jumping during the better part of the 1940s, states Earl Watkins (long-standing drummer and musician's union executive) in a recent interview. Kaiser established its shipyards and, in support, munitions plants sprang up on both sides of the Bay.

These industries recruited African Americans from the Southlands. On Seventh Street, continues Watkins, you had the Swing Club, Esther's Breakfast Club, Club Villa, The Rendezvous and the swank Slim Jenkins Place, not only a nightspot, but also a meeting place for black civic and civil rights groups.

Down the block you found John Singer's 49er Café and The Clef Club. Up on Eighth, the Elks and The North Pole (Colony Club). Seventh Street, formerly known as Railroad Avenue, became the terminus for the transcontinental railroad in 1869. It was said by West Oaklanders that you did not need to travel downtown – you could get it all on Seventh Street. West Seventh evolved into a noted centre for Afro-American nightclubs as early as 1910. On the seamier side, West Seventh became the Mecca for gambling and prostitution.

In the centre of all this was Harold 'Slim' Jenkins Place, right next to the Creole Café. Slim came to Oakland after the Depression. Slim Jenkins, unlike other black club proprietors, wanted to operate a high society venue, one that catered to the well-heeled, three-piece suit set. The food was the best and so was the top-flight entertainment, which included luminaries such as Billie Holiday, Joe Turner, Billy Eckstine and Count Basie.

Into the West Oakland environment came Martin, Texas born cotton-picker Bob Geddins, who in 1942 after having fielded complaints, saw the need to serve migrant workers who longed for good old down home

Southern blues and gospel recordings.

Geddins originally operated a record store three doors down from 'Slim's'. Then, after scant training in welding at Kaiser and radio repair at night school, with help from Los Angeles friend Jack Gutshall and his stepfather, built his first record manufacturing plant on Eighth and Center Streets. As well as creating his own product, Geddins started taking on small label operators such as Ollie Hunt at Olliet, Harry Leader at Trilon, A.B. Strong at Strong's and 'Little' Jesse Jaxyson, who in 1948 set up the short-lived Jaxyson Record Company out of 1606 Seventh Street, adjacent to the Lincoln Theatre complex at 1620-28.

John Vaughn built the Lincoln in 1919. First an amusement company, then a black-serving vaudeville concert and movie venue, the Lincoln evolved into The Damascus Missionary Baptist Church in 1961. The diminutive Little Jesse C. Jaxyson (pronounced 'Jackson') was born an only child on 5th March, 1912 in Denver, Colorado.

His mother, Lulu J. Braatford was a skilled needlewoman and devout Baptist whose religion rubbed off on young Jesse. Lulu and Jesse moved to West Oakland in the 1930s. During his early years Jesse converted to Christian Science, becoming a member of The First Church of Religious Science on Clarewood Drive in Oakland. Following Mary Baker Eddy's somewhat Buddhist spiritual precepts, Jesse neither smoked, drank nor gave blood. He opted for a healthy diet, drank a regimen of fresh juice and when no longer able to drive rode around the streets of Oakland on his bicycle wearing a white hard-hat until well into his eighties. Jesse also became a conscientious objector and believed in diplomatic solutions as opposed to conflict.

In 1943 Jesse went to prison for three years for failing to enlist, an extremely courageous act at that time, particularly for an African American. Like Geddins, Jesse was clever with his hands and could fix anything mechanical, he was a 'jack-of-all-trades.' At his church Jesse became an accomplished keyboardist and played during worship service. Although described by some as cantankerous, others found him quite amusing with his witty quips and skill for instant one-liners. When asked after his health, he frequently responded 'better than the weather'.

He met Clarrissa Mayfield (Keil), a choir member at his church, and they married in 1948. Jesse and Clarrissa set up a radio repair shop at 1606 Seventh Street and Peralta, which later evolved into an electrical repair business. His store is remembered by some as being a kind of 'storage' space with ever-increasing mountains of audio equipment filling every square inch of space.



'Little' Jesse Jaxyson in the studio circa 1949. Photo courtesy Opal Louis Nations



The Lincoln Theatre, circa mid 1970s. Jaxyson Records, (Jaxyson TV repair store) is to the right of the theatre (then called the Peabody Blue Flame Take Out). Courtesy Opal Louis Nations



King Louis H. Narcisse chooses a crown. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations



Johnny Fuller in the studio. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations.



"Little" Jesse Jaxyson outside his shop. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations

Out back he had a room converted into a makeshift recording studio. The purchase of portable recording equipment built for domestic use became a popular household luxury at the time. You could buy mikes, metal discs and portable recorders quite easily and at a reasonable cost. This made things very easy for the enterprising electrical sound engineering buffs and Jesse was soon cutting acetate-coated metal discs.

He used Bob Geddins to master and press his recordings, which in all likelihood were only available for

sale over the counter of his repair shop. Later on he operated a sideline business in station wagon sound trucks, which he used to promote local political candidates.

My sense is that Jesse learned a good deal about the independent record label business from Geddins, who always sought to set up little business deals to pay off personal debt. Geddins certainly helped to supply artists, although walk-in-talent seems inevitable due to the store's location. Not long after setting up his studio Jesse started into the dry-cleaning business, which he ran long after his recording operation ceased in 1951 or thereabouts. Jesse's fix-it man abilities led to a period where he taught college classes in TV and radio repair.

Of the eleven known Jaxyson releases, a quarter are blues. The same disproportion exists for the twenty 'rescued' compositions, which have an interesting history, associated with them. A fellow by the name of Dan and a friend found them on a garbage dump in Martinez. They took the acetates (including the Duo Disc acetates shown in the discography), to a swap meet in Hayward, where they were purchased by Dick Bass, who had them re-mastered by Marc Ryan at his Bennett House Studios in North San Juan, California. The degree of artistry on these recordings is superb, and as far as I know, few releases ever made their way outside of California, thus making them extremely hard to find.

Not only do we know next to nothing about many of the artists, we also sadly cannot confirm the exact number of Jaxyson releases and why the record numbering system makes no sense. For instance, the A-side numbered as 32 was repeated for both Charles White's 'Before This Time Another Year' and for Brother Johnny Fuller's reading of 'Poor Pilgrim Of Sorrow'.

The Jaxyson story is full of intriguing anomalies. Jesse's first release gives us Goldrush, a blues singer in the plaintive Texas tradition, sounding hauntingly similar to Mercy Dee without piano support. The flip, 'T.P. Railer' (Texas and Pacific Railroad) by Black Diamond, is a lyric change of 'Texas Blues' by Joseph Butler. Our third artist, the blind



Label shots Dick Bass and Big Joe Louis

Charles White, supported by Joseph Butler on guitar, is an interesting but unknown entity who had three songs etched on three releases, two with primitive funnel and bucket accompaniment.

Johnny Fuller was born in Edwards, Mississippi on 20th April, 1929. His family moved to Vallejo in 1934. Inspired by his father, he taught himself country guitar by following an instruction book. He sang and played in local churches where he hooked up with The Golden West Quartet, formerly the Teenage Gospel Singers. According to tenor singer Adell Lee, Fuller never gelled with the members in the group and was let go. He then cut his first side, the traditional 'Poor Pilgrim Of Sorrow' for Jaxyson in September 1948. On a second release he beautifully rendered Elisha A. Hoffman's 'I Must Tell Jesus'.

Rev. (aka Bishop) Louis H. Narcisse enjoyed three Jaxyson releases (five songs in all) and was probably the label's only respectable success, sales wise, due to Bay-wide popularity and influence. Narcisse, a Creole, was born in Gretna, Louisiana on 27th April, 1921. Steeping himself in Roman Catholic regalia and local voodooism, Narcisse moved to Vallejo in the late 1930s. During World War II he worked as a rigger, before opening his first West Oakland storefront church. He sang baritone briefly with Oakland's Rising Star Gospel Singers, but did not record with them.

'My Eternal Home', 'Down On My Knees', 'I'm Going To Tell God', 'What Could I Do' and 'Get Back Jordan' are Narcisse's first 1949 waxings. Susan Bennett, the obscure artist on the underside of Narcisse's third release, warbles Thomas Dorsey's 'Singin' In My Soul' in the muscular Sister Rosetta Tharpe tradition. Jaxyson 155 A/ B features the New Bethel Echoes/ Jerome Evans and is the only Jaxyson release I have heard that fails to meet the usual standard of excellent musical artistry.

Jesse Jaxyson's last known release was by San Francisco's Gospel Trumpets, aka the legendary Silver Trumpet Singers, who encountered few equally talented rivals in their time. Like the Soul Stirrers, the Trumpets set up a junior quartet, the Silver Trumpet Juniors. 'Good Morning In Heaven' and the song made widely popular by Roscoe Robinson and the 5 Blind Boys of Mississippi in 1962 – 'Constantly Abiding' – constitute two of the finest Bay Area shout gospel performances on disc.

Jesse lived to the ripe old age of 93 and fathered three children, before dying on 20th October, 2005. A memorial service was held at the Colonial Chapel on High Street in Oakland, attended by his two surviving daughters, Brenda and Barbara.

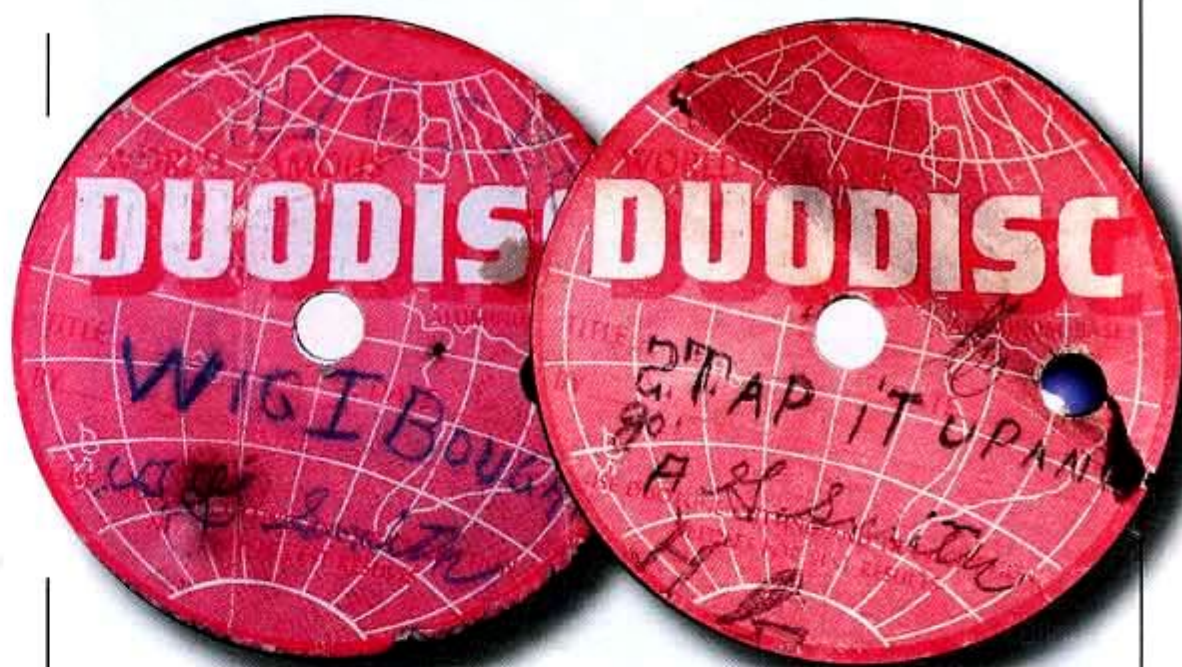
Thanks to Dick Bass, without whom all would be lost, and to Earl Watkins, Steve LaVoie at the History Room of The Oakland Library, Jesse's first wife Clarrissa Keil and daughter Barbara Llarena.

Jaxyson Records Discography

By Opal Louis Nations and Chris Strachwitz

This listing is in no way complete, both in regard to known releases and the number of unreleased acetates and test pressings. All additions are most welcome.

Goldrush (vocal/piano)		
JG-71149-6A	All My Money Is Gone	6A
Black Diamond (vocal/gtr.)		
JB-7-848	Lonesome Blues	50B
NB: Also pressed on red vinyl		
Brother Johnny Fuller (19-year-old wonder singer)		
23JF-2-9114B	Poor Pilgrim Of Sorrow	32A
Charlie White (Blind street singer)		
JBW-5-848	Stand By Me	5B
Guitar by J. Butler, tin funnel and water bucket		
Charlie White (Blind street singer)		
JF2-9114B	How Long (spiritual)	23A
Sister H. Mathews		
JF-17948	Stand By	23B
National Revival Singer, w/ J. Butler, gtr.		
Charlie White (Blind street singer)		
JW-3-848	Well Done – Charlie White	41A
Guitar by J. Butler, tin funnel and water bucket		
Bro. Johnny Fuller (19-year-old wonder singer) (vocal & gtr.)		
JF-1-91248	I Must Tell Jesus (spiritual)	41B
Black Diamond (vocal & gtr.)		
JB4-848	T.P. Railer	50A
JB7-848	Lonesome Blues	50B
Issued with hand-script on a white blank label		
All of the above issued during 1948		
Rev. L.H. Narcisse (Spiritual singer with pipe organ piano acc.)		
82349-AJN	My Eternal Home	104A
104A also issued as 104B, mislabeled "Thank God"		
Rev. L.H. Narcisse (Spiritual singer with pipe organ piano acc.)		
82349	Down On My Knees	131
Rev. L.H. Narcisse (Spiritual singer with pipe organ piano acc.)		
JN71549	What Could I Do – Rev. L.H. Narcisse	105A
Rev. L.H. Narcisse (Spiritual singer with pipe organ piano acc.)		
JN105-B-71549	Get Back Jordan	105B
Rev. L.H. Narcisse (Spiritual singer with pipe organ piano acc.)		
JN-71449	I'm Going To Tell God	122
Susan Bennett (Gospel singer with acc. by piano, bass & elec. gtr.)		
JJB-12549	Singing In My Soul	113A
105A / 122 also issued as a test pressing		
Jerome Evans		
?	Have Time For Jesus	155A
New Bethel Echoes		
?	God's Word	155B
Gospel Trumpets		
?	Constantly Abiding	159A
Gospel Trumpets		
?	Good Morning To Heaven	159B
All of the above issued during 1949		
Note: Earlier labels show Jaxyson's store address; others show Bob Geddins' studio address		



Test Pressings and Acetates (no particular sequence):

- Step It Up And Go A.G. Smith (1948) (incomplete)
- Wig I Brought A.G. Smith (1948) (incomplete)
- Texas Blues Joseph Butler (November 1949)
- Hold That Train Conductor Gold Rush (1948)
- From Bad To Worse (incomplete) Johnny Fuller (1948)
- Goin' Back Down To Old Mobile Mercy Dee (?) (1948)
- Jaxyson's Scratch (instr.) Unknown Artist (1949)
- Weep Below, Children (Weep No More) Unknown Artist (1949)
- I'll Meet You In The Morning Unknown Artist (1949)
- Stand By Me Unknown Artist (1949)
- Hand Me Down My Silver Trumpet, Gabriel Sister Rita (1948)
- Today Rainbow Gospel Singers (1949)
- On The Battlefield Rainbow Gospel Singers (1949)
- Didn't It Rain Charles White (1948)
- Say A Word Unknown Artist (1949)
- Standing On Jordan Unknown Artist (1949)
- Jesus Remembers Unknown Artist (1949)
- I Am Bound For Canaan Land Willie M. Powell and Myrta Sue (1949)
- Rough and Ready Unknown Artist (1949)
- Glow Worm (unrehearsed) 6-year-old Jesse (1949)

1606 – 7th Street, Oakland, Calif.
Manufactured by Jaxyson
Professional Recording Co.



Label shots: Bruce Bastin, Dick Bass and Big Joe Louis. Duo Disc acetates by A.G. Smith