The Mae Barnes Story

Opal Louis Nations

Inleiding

Opal Louis Nations is in Engeland geboren, maar woont al heel lang in de U.S.A. De veelzijdige Opal Louis Nations is onder meer een gerenommeerd historicus en researcher op het gebied van jazz, R&B en vooral gospel in de eerste decennia na de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Hij heeft talloze cd's geproduceerd, samengesteld en van hoesteksten voorzien voor o.a. Acrobat, Ace, Nashboro, Speciality en JSP. Daarnaast heeft hij vele publicaties op zijn naam staan, die de laatste jaren veelal verschijnen in Blues & Rhythm (zie ook 'De Leestafel'). Als gastschrijver biedt hij in dit nummer zijn diensten aan. Enige voorwaarde was, dat het artikel in het Engels wordt gepubliceerd. Aan die voorwaarde heeft de redactie van DJM graag willen voldoen.

"Queen of the Barnes Soir"

Blues, jazz and folk music has been an intricate part of New York's Greenwich Village for most of the twentieth century. Journeyman folksters, blues singles, jazz trios and quartets flourished. Native 'Villagers' would intermingle with the fashionable set of New York's Upper East Side and with tourists from all parts. Folk and blues musicians like Big Bill Broonzy, Memphis Slim and Willie Dixon worked at celebrated venues like the Village Vanguard. Jazz luminaries and related artists found haven at such spots as Eddy Condon's, Nick's and Tony Pastor's.

The charismatic Mae Barnes, on the other hand, spent seven years at The Village's Boite and after a stint on Park Avenue went on to become a long-standing resident at the Bon Soir Club, rechristened because of her lengthy tenure there as 'The Barnes Soir' Club. Mae Barnes, jazz stylist, blues singer, pianist, multi-instrumentalist, celebrated terpsichorean, comedienne and all-round entertainer, was born Edith Mae Stith on Wednesday, January 23rd, 1907 in Manhattan,



according to her birth certificate. A census report tells that her parents were New Yorkers, Robert and Martha Stith, and that she was born in 1892 which would make her 104 years old when she died. I find this extremely unlikely. Yet, on the other hand, it would fit with her entry into show business at the Plantation Club on the chorus line (if she signed up in 1918). It is unlikely that twelve-year-olds would have been allowed on the chorus line after World War I. Mae also had two older sisters, Emelia and Maude.

She was raised in Manhattan where, as a precocious, mischievous, impressionable child she became infatuated by the vigorous and stimulating night life of Harlem and the bright lights and gaiety on Broadway. Somewhere along the line she changed her non- show-



business name to Edith Mae Barnes, Bored with school at the close of World War I, she dropped out on the pretense of moving the Cleveland and supposedly finagled a place on the chorus line at Harlem's illustrious Plantation Club run by Sam Selvin. This would have been shortly before Ethel Waters joined the Plantation Revue, replacing principal Florence Mills. Barnes shortened her name and toured the Southlands as a vaudeville performer, all the while working on perfecting her own song, dance and comedy routine.

If a later birthdate is believed, this would make her seventeen years of age when she was picked to join 'Runnin' Wild', an On-Broadway revue. Elizabeth Welsh, a soon-to-be star in her own right, was also a member of the troupe. 'Runnin' Wild' toured nationally and was an immense success. It was here that Barnes was credited with introducing The Charleston to Boston. Critics labeled Barnes 'The Bronze Ann Pennington'. Pennington, the stunning redheaded beauty 'Penny' Ann Pennington, otherwise known as 'The Duchess', was born in Wilmington. Considered a 'shake and quiver' dancer (a variation on the Black Bottom), Pennington, like Barnes, was also highly commended for her admirable rendering of The Charleston. Like Barnes, she was known for her quick and witty personality. She gambled heavily and enjoyed many suitors. Her dressing room door bore the sign 'For Men Only'.



Barnes' second national vaudeville tour was with 'Shuffle Along'. For this she was honored



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as 'the greatest living female tap dancer' by the great hoofer of the Cotton Club, Bill 'Bojangles' Robinson. She created her third Broadway sensation in 'Rainbow' with Charlie Ruggles.

The Afro American out of Baltimore wrote up Barnes' performance in that city as inciting 'riots of laughter' with her seeming difficulty in being able to repeat her routine after being encored. So cleverly was this executed that the crowd boiled over with laughter. Barnes was joined by Clarence Johnson and the pair danced their insanely comic version of the Black Bottom. Later at the Vanguard club in the Village it took Barnes fifty minutes to get off stage on opening night.

In 1928 Barnes appeared in the stage show 'On The Air' with Edith Wilson and others at New York's Lafayette Theatre at 7th Avenue and 132nd Street. 'On The Air' too had been launched on Broadway. Sadly her on-Broadway stage life came to a temporary close in 1938.

A car accident left Barnes with a fractured pelvis from which she suffered much lasting pain. It was now she decided to cut back her dancing and to play up her vocal skills. Soon Barnes' New York cabaret appearances took a turn for the better. She no longer had to play sleazy dives on the sad side of town but had begun headlining at clubs like to Little Casino, Cerutti, Le Cupidon and The Blue Angel. She captured acclaim at Ciro's, both in Hollywood and Honolulu. She became the darling of high society, making frequent appearances at socialite Elsa Maxell's parties attended by the Duke and Duchess of Windsor.

Barnes was making enough money to be able to afford to give benefits. One such took place in early June 1948 at The Central Needle Trades High School on West 24th Street to raise funds for the Sydenham Hospital. Along with Barnes, Dean Martin, Rose Murphy, Miles Davis, Milt Jackson plus a host of other celebrities put in an appearance. The school was packed to the gills. People were turned away. Barnes had now reached the peak of her renowned career.

On March 25, 1950 Barnes embarked on a seven-month long European tour. She played at both the Colony and Astor Clubs in London and rubbed shoulders with the well-heeled. She followed this by taking the lead role in Jack Hylton's long-running 'Knight of Madness' revue. Her last off-Broadway appearances were with the final days of the Ziegfeld Follies in Boston, opposite the great Tallulah Bankhead. In 1951 she opened at Nat Sackin's Bon Soir cellar club in The Village with Garland Wilson and a little later with the addition of the Three Flames.

The original Three Flames were Tiger Haynes, lead singer and guitar, Roy Testamark, piano Mae Barnes in 1958 (courtesy Opal Louis Nations)

and vocal harmony, and Averill 'Rill' Pollard, bass and vocal harmony. All hailed from the West Indies, Haynes and Testamark came from St. Croix and Pollard was from Barbados. Haynes started out with Plink, Plank & Plunk in 1939, then formed the Three Flames in 1945. They recorded in the prevailing jump & jive style for Gotham, Columbia, MGM and later on for Mercury. In 1954 Testamark was replaced by Lionel Morgan. Haynes was also an accomplished dancer and often shared song and dance routines with Mae Barnes during Barnes' act. Haynes and Barnes had much in common. He too danced in Broadway shows like 'Kiss Me Kate' and played the Tin Man in 'The Wizard of Oz'.



The Three Flames, left-to-right: Tiger Hanes, Roy Testamark and Averill Pollard, early 1950s (courtesy Marv Goldberg)

By January 1953 Barnes and the Three Flames were regularly drawing in large crowds at the Bon Soir. This attracted the attention of the Ertegun brothers, Ahmet and Nesuhi, jazz aficionados and proprietors of Atlantic Records on West 56th Street. On January 19th, Barnes, the Three Flames and Garland Wilson recorded fourteen songs for Atlantic. Ten of these were issued on Barnes' first album entitled 'Fun with Mae Barnes'. This gave birth to a four-title EP and ten songs were reissued in 1989 as part of a various artists 4-CD set called the Erteguns' New York Cabaret Music Collection. The set included (It Ain't Gonna Be No) Topsy, an early example of black pride set to music, and On The Sunny Side Of The Street, which became one of Barnes' signature songs. After its release, the album drew a lot of local attention but did not warrant a rapidly issued follow up record. Atlantic's blues & rhythm sessions were drawing more action at the time. The Erteguns personally enjoyed Barnes' jazz phrasings, her unstoppable energy and comic relief.



'Fun with Mae Barnes', Atlantic Records 1540-4 (1954) - LP cover (courtesy Opal Louis Nations)

In 1954 Mae Barnes began to appear on T.V. variety shows and sang two songs in a musical with Shirley Booth called 'By the Beautiful Sea'.

Mae Barnes often added irreverent interpolations into familiar lyrics, like in the song *One For My Baby* where she substituted "set 'em up Joe" for "stick 'em up Joe." New York Times music columnist Stephen Holden wrote, "She combined the insinuation of the bawdy blues with taut jazz phrasing."

During the first week of March 1956, Barnes headlined at the Apollo in Harlem alongside Mambo stylist Alfredito and his mambo band.



The Three Flames at the Bon Soir – Mercury LP 20239 (1957) – LP cover. (courtesy Opal Louis Nations)

No doubt Mae performed a demonstration of her take on the Mambo which was fast fading as a fad. A year later the Three Flames recorded their Mercury album at the Bon Soir without the presence of their old club-mate Mae Barnes. At the time they were enjoying their own T.V. show on NBC and over the next five years found enough work to stay solvent. This included supporting the young and hopeful Barbra Streisand.

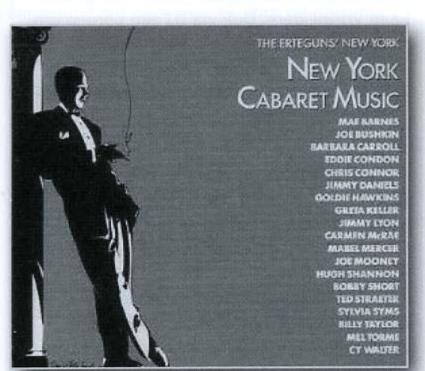
In 1958 Mae Barnes was picked up by Vanguard Records' A&R man John Hammond just a few minutes from Atlantic on West 55th Street. Hammond recorded her Theatre Showcase album for Vanguard with Buck Clayton on trumpet, Aaron Bell, bass, Joe Jones, drums with Ray Bryant and Ray Tunia on piano. Fourteen songs emerged, including a personalized version of Dallas Bartley's / Annie Laurie's *They Raided The Joint*. The Vanguard album drew more attention than did her work on Atlantic. But both releases failed to capture that special magnetism Mae Barnes generated on the night club stage.



Vanguard LP 9039 (1958) - LP cover. (courtesy Opal Louis Nations)

In 1959 Mae Barnes appeared with Kid Ory's Band on his Doctor Jazz T.V. show that featured Lil Hardin on piano, Red Allen on trumpet plus a slew of other stellar musicians. Even here Barnes continued to blaze brightly,

singing strongly and side-stepping all the while (this cameo clip can currently be caught on YouTube.) That same year she appeared on T.V.'s 'Playboy Penthouse'. Her appearance was caught by her old friends, the Erteguns, at Atlantic Records who came up with the idea of recording her again, this time live from the Playboy Club. Twenty-five songs were taped during three sessions held on September 23rd, 24th and 26th, 1960. These included some of her signature songs like (*It Ain't Gonna Be No*) *Topsy, They Raided The Joint, On The Sunny Side Of The Street* and *Sweet Georgia Brown*.



The Erteguns' New York Cabaret Music CD cover (1987). (courtesy Opal Louis Nations)

Mae Barnes was appearing at the Playboy alongside Johnny Janis & The Billy Wallace Trio. Critics politely described Barnes as "a belting and dynamic club vocalist who put across a song with unique diction, always stressing the rhythmic beat and interpretive freedom of jazz, in addition to being an excellent pianist." Despite the fanfare, Atlantic chose not to release any of the twenty-five songs. The world of popular music and dance had changed so much since Barnes' glory days. Only the most notable elderly dowagers of oldtime vaudeville could afford to stay regularly on the boards, with perhaps a few exceptions. Mae Barnes did manage to find occasional work at the older clubs that gradually diminished in number during the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1987 Mae Barnes was interviewed for the documentary movie 'Wild Women Don't Have

the Blues'. This was her last notable public appearance. Edith Mae Barnes died of terminal cancer at the Jamaica Plains Hospital in New York on December 13th, 1996. Her memorial service was conducted at St. Peter's Lutheran Church at 54th Street and Lexington Avenue on January 30th. Other accounts indicate that Barnes died in Boston, but legal documents prove otherwise. Artists like Mae Barnes were one of a kind. Entertainers who came up at a time when you could rub shoulders with the titans like the great Bessie Smith and the young Ella Fitzgerald. Back in the day, Barnes' talents were often compared to both of them.

With research assistance from Dan Kochakian, Eric LeBlanc and Bob Eagle

Aanbevolen: www.Youtube.com de documentaire uit de jaren 1959 'Chicago & all that Jazz' met o.a. Jack Teagarden, Gene Krupa, Red Allen, Kid Ory, Blossom Seeley en Mae Barnes e.v.a. Deel 5 bevat een prachtig duet tussen Mae Barnes (snare drums, voc) en Lil Hardin (p).

Nieuwtje

Drummer Lucas van Merwijk heeft donderdag de MCN Global Act Award gewonnen. Deze prijs is bestemd voor een Nederlandse artiest die al langere tijd toonaangevend is in de wereldmuziek. Hij ontving de Award tijdens de Dutch Jazz & World Meeting in Amsterdam. Van Merwijk leidt onder meer de Cubop City Big Band en is daarnaast docent aan de World Music Academy van Codarts te Rotterdam, afdeling World Music, en aan het Sweelinck Conservatorium te Amsterdam.

Lucas van Merwijk wint Global Act Award 2010