



Electric Violins and Jazz Violinists 1930s-1950s - PART 2

by Anthony Barnett

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Some conclusions and questions contained in this article correct erroneous assumptions made in previous writings elsewhere - AB

Ray Perry and the Vega Electric Violin

Currently, there are six known photos of Ray Perry with violin, showing at least two different electrically amplified instruments. Two photos are dated 1939. Firstly, the *Baltimore Afro-American* (16 September 1939) shows Perry with the Smiling Kings of Rhythm at the Silver Dollar, Boston. Secondly, the Vega electric instruments catalogue, No. 33, printed October 1939, includes a photo of Ray Perry, Boston, as well as other endorsements by dance band and theatre orchestra violinists, which shows Perry playing the Boston company's stick-like solid-body electric violin, with Vega amplifier. Vega's instrument was by no means the first of its kind but it does appear to have been the first to gain currency. (Hugo Benioff, for example, applied for a patent for a quite different stick-like instrument on 2 April 1938, granted 19 November 1940, but neither it nor his later skeletal instrument of conventional shape made it into production.) The available microfilm photocopy of the BAA Perry photo is not good enough to distinguish the shape of the violin but its electric cable is visible. Surely it is the Vega.

Three photos show Perry with Lionel Hampton or with Hampton's orchestra, with whom Perry played violin and alto sax 1940-1943. He recorded on violin, almost certainly audibly on electric violin, with small group off-shoots of the main orchestra, rereleased on countless Hampton CDs. Firstly, a studio shot of Perry with the stick-like Vega, along with Hampton, endorsing the instrument appears in Vega's ad in *Down Beat* (1 October 1941). Secondly, a photo of five members of the Hampton orchestra at a Seattle venue in *Metronome* (November 1940) shows Perry soloing on violin. Definition is poor. It may or may not be the Vega. It may or may not be a conventionally shaped instrument. Nor is a cable immediately in evidence though it would be surprising if, at this point, it were a completely unamplified instrument. Vernon Alley is also seen in the photo, playing his stick-like electric bass. Vega manufactured such an instrument though this does not appear to be it. Howard Rumsey was photographed playing the Los Angeles company Rickenbacker's tubular bass with Stan Kenton in 1941. In 2004 Rumsey told Stephen Fratallone at <http://www.jazzconnectionmag.com>: "I played it for a year. The Rickenbacker guitar company built an electric bass and gave one to me and one to Moses Allen who was in Jimmie Lunceford's band." Does Rumsey really mean Vernon Alley with Hampton rather than Allen with Lunceford? Or did all three play the instrument? Alley's bass certainly looks tubular. Rumsey also reported Decca's early problems recording an electric bass satisfactorily.

Thirdly, and more crucially, what are we to make of the well-defined undated photo, reproduced in the liner notes to CD AB Fable ABCD1-006 *Ray Perry*, which also shows Perry soloing with the Hampton orchestra? He is playing an electrically amplified violin, with clearly visible cable, but it is certainly not the stick-like Vega. Instead, it is a conventionally shaped open-body violin and looks as if it may be one with pickup attached, as in the 1940 Hickory House photo of Smith, rather than a purpose-built electric instrument. There is no belly control. So, again, is this an amplification set-up by Vega or National or another manufacturer, whether personalized specifically for Perry or not? Smith and Perry were close. Are they, by the early 1940s, using the same attached pickup system?

Makes the Band!



. . . says Lionel Hampton about the
VEGA ELECTRIC VIOLIN

Lionel Hampton pretty well summed up the reaction of the public and musicians alike when he said, "Man, that Vega Electric really makes the band!" We wouldn't go so far as to say that but after you've heard Ray Perry take a brilliant solo, then blend in with clarinets or a muted brass section you'll agree that it's really an attraction.

The VEGA Electric Violin is a superb instrument. It plays and handles like any real fine violin. It has a gorgeous silvery tone and it reproduces as smooth as silk. Have your dealer show you one today.

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At some point, presumably after he left Hampton, Perry appears to have abandoned the purpose-built electric and/or pickup amplified violin altogether. He plays unamplified acoustic violin on the 1944 trio and 1945 group recordings released on the AB Fable CD cited above. It would be possible to explain that by their being private home recordings but for a review in *Down Beat* (17 June 1946) of a Perry trio engagement at the Spotlight Club, New York, opposite Dizzy Gillespie's big band: "Ex-Boston boy and Hampton-ite Perry now playing straight rather than electric violin comes on with some of the most frantic ideas and unusual conception heard recently on Swing Street." Perry also sounds as if he is playing an acoustic instrument (he also plays alto) on his 1946 recordings for Continental as a member of J. C. Heard's orchestra accompanying Ethel Waters.

In 1946 and 1947, and again in 1949 and 1950, Perry recorded only on alto as a member of Illinois Jacquet's orchestras. Nevertheless, he played violin off-record. A photo of Perry soloing on violin appeared in *Pittsburgh Courier* (28 January 1950). No one else is shown but the caption implication is that this is a photo of him with a new Jacquet orchestra. He is hugging the microphone playing an unamplified acoustic violin, despite Jacquet's orchestra of the time being a big band. In the available indistinct copy what might be taken as a truncated light-colored cable is not that but a neck chord for supporting his alto sax. Such a chord can also be seen in the undated Hampton photo, together with cable. Perry's brief and under-recorded life came to an end autumn 1950 with complications during illness.

(Western Swing fiddler Cliff Brunner is known to have owned a Vega but he neither liked it nor recorded on it.)

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(These three photos are not produced in this article because of their poor quality.)



Ginger Smock and the Beauchamp Rickenbacker Electro Violin

Los Angeles Central Avenue violinist Ginger Smock recorded on the stick-like Beauchamp Rickenbacker Electro violin once, before abandoning it in favor of an unamplified conventional violin. Some Rickenbacker violins were tubular, as was their bass. The Rickenbacker appears on her first recordings, a four-title bop to ballads all-women 1946 pickup session under bassist Vivien Garry's leadership, supervised by Leonard Feather for RCA Victor. One coupling was included in the 78 album *Girls in Jazz*, the inside cover of which includes a photo of the group during recording. The other coupling was released separately as a single. All four titles are released together for the first time on CD AB Fable ABCD1-010 *Ginger Smock*. One track has never before been rereleased, either on CD or LP. That was the end of electrics for Smock. She did not care for it. There is the suggestion that she was persuaded to use the Rickenbacker on the 1946 session; that it was loaned, or given, to her by the Los Angeles company. Nor does any later photo of her show her playing an instrument with a pickup. Yet Smock's mike-hugging acoustic violin on ferocious 1950s rhythm and blues sessions reveals that she did just fine among the horns.

(to be continued)

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Anthony Barnett has published bio-discographies of Stuff Smith, Desert Sands/Up Jumped the Devil; and Eddie South, Black Gypsy. He edits Fable Bulletin: Violin Improvisation Studies, an online update facility to printed volumes of the bulletin and books. He is a contributor to the latest editions of New Grove Dictionary of Jazz and Music and Musicians.

Since 2002 he has issued previously unreleased and other rare recordings by a wealth of historic jazz violinists on his AB Fable label. During the late 1960s and 1970s, in particular, he worked as a percussionist with John Tchicai's Cadentia Nova Danica, and performed occasionally in concert with Derek Bailey, Don Cherry, Mbizo Dyani, Evan Parker, Leo Smith.

AB Fable website is <http://www.abar.net>