



Stuff Smith and Anthony Barnett

# Electric Violins and Jazz Violinists 1930s-1950s Part 3

by Anthony Barnett

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

## ***Stéphane Grappelli and Uncertainly Identified Electric Violin***

Stéphane Grappelli is not often associated with electric violins but there are a couple of matters worth examining.

A London *Melody Maker* (15 November 1952) Max Jones interview-article with Grappelli is headlined with Grappelli's attributed words, "Now the Violin Can Find a *Real* Place in Jazz . . .": "In his Variety act with pianist Yorke de Sousa, Grappelli [*sic*] still uses his standard violin. But for dances and jazz sessions his improvisations are now amplified directly he puts bow to steel strings. He is an enthusiastic exponent of the electric violin-an American instrument that radio listeners heard for the first time in *World of Jazz* on November 1. 'Of course the instrument's full value cannot be realized from a record or broadcast [. . .] because the amplifier isn't really needed then. The tone sounds different, yes; but you must hear this violin in a hall to get the whole effect. It is wonderful.' The wonder instrument is a curious sawn-off looking thing, visually unimpressive and extraordinarily heavy. We wanted to know if it demanded a special technique. [. . .] 'The fingerboard is the same, but it has to have metal strings. For me, the finger-pressure is about the same as I normally use, but the bowing is different. This needs great control [. . .] You must have very steady bowing, for every little sound is enlarged through the loudspeaker. Each time I am going to use the electric fiddle I must get used to it again; I must play all day. [. . .] It isn't easy to play well at first, but once you have mastered this fiddle it is fantastic. [. . .] This fiddle is definitely better than the normal one for jazz playing; there is no comparison. For solos it is powerful and exciting. [. . .] It means that the violin can take a full part in the jazz orchestra at last. It's no longer a little voice; it's more like four fiddles. I mean, I may play louder than four fiddles, but, of course, the sound is not the same. In fact, it is an entirely new sound, and eventually it will add new tone colour to jazz recordings, too."

For all the hype, and there is more, some of it quite silly, Grappelli's enthusiasm is hardly believable, playing to the journalistic gallery no doubt. Was he being asked to test it or endorse it? It is doubtful that he hung on to the instrument long or that he ever recorded on it. There do not seem to be any contemporary recordings by Grappelli. Stupidly, the instrument is neither named nor shown in the accompanying photo, in which Grappelli is seen with an acoustic violin. Why? Did editorial policy forbid the naming of the manufacturer? However, an issue of *The New Musical Express* the previous month (3 October 1952) does include a photo of Grappelli playing the unnamed instrument "made in the States." It is stick-like, along the lines of some Vega and Rickenbacker models but not exactly like those known elsewhere. But then it is some years later. Its modeling most closely resembles a Vega but it should be noted from Vega's 1939 catalogue: "You can use any kind of strings, regardless whether metal or gut, as no special strings are necessary. It is light in weight and balanced so that it is easy to play." Would Vega have regressed over twelve years to the "extraordinarily heavy" instrument in need of steel strings described in the *Melody Maker*, assuming that Vega's catalogue description is accurate? Ben Heaney: "Grappelli's instrument is almost certainly a Vega violin. There definitely appear to be two dials, which rules out the Beauchamp Rickenbacker. Also the stub of the upper bout is too different to be a Beauchamp. My only doubt creeps in because this is some years after the Vega violin first appeared and it didn't really have any impact on the market then. Why was Grappelli playing it?" Why indeed! A still of the *NME* photo can be seen in DVD Music on Earth MoE 101 *Stéphane Grappelli: A Life in the Jazz Century*. [All things considered an excellent production, curiously unlike the director's basic-error-ridden hagiography *Stéphane Grappelli: With and Without Django* (London, 2003) which is best avoided unless read with the utmost circumspection. For example, Michel Warlop never recorded classical music under the nom-de-musique Waclaw Niemczyk, who was a different and very real violinist; a canard unfortunately picked up from *New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, 2nd ed.]

## ***Joe Venuti and Stéphane Grappelli Discuss Pickups***

On 21 July 1974 Bill Bacin privately recorded Grappelli and Joe Venuti in conversation off-stage at the *Nice Jazz Festival* discussing the pros and cons of contact mikes. Venuti, to the surprise of Grappelli, expresses his dislike of the Barcus-Berry, used, particularly in the 1960s, by Ponty and many others, describing it as no good and shrill. Grappelli complains about a recent acoustic engagement where he could not be heard properly because of the venue's poor microphone. Venuti shows Grappelli his set-up, with separate controls for each string, custom-built for him by a German manufacturer whom he does not name.

Grappelli enthusiastically accepts Venuti's offer to send him one. Venuti also says he does not use the pickup in the recording studio, only during live performance. The original tape is deposited in the AB Fable Archive.

Paul Anastasio, who studied with Venuti, contributes: "To my knowledge, Joe never used anything made by Barcus-Berry and, in addition to his telling his feelings about those pickups to Grappelli, he told me as well, probably in 1977 or 1978, that he did not like the Barcus-Berrys because they were too shrill, which they were. When I saw Joe live and in photos taken at around the same time (late 1976-early 1978) he always used a DeArmand contact microphone attached to the top of the violin with a rubber band, as was also used, as you well know, by Stuff Smith. Earlier photos show Venuti using a rectangular tan pickup about which I have no knowledge, although it was almost certainly a contact mike along the lines of the DeArmand. If indeed this was the German pickup that Joe was referring to in his conversation with Grappelli, I strongly suspect that the separate controls for each string would have been controls on a separate graphic equalizer tailored to emphasize or de-emphasize the specific frequencies of each string, as a contact pickup would not deliver separate inputs from each string but only a signal converted from the vibration of the spot on the top where the pickup contacted the violin. After Joe's Sanctus Seraphim violin was stolen from his hotel room in New York (1972 or 1974) he played on an assortment of fairly average instruments, one of which, a violin made by Joseph Stamps of Fort Worth, Texas, he gave to me. On some of his later recordings he played electrically and either a direct line output was taken from the amp, or, much more likely, the amp was simply miked. Perhaps the recording engineers used a mike on the violin as well and blended the two signals for a more natural tone."

Latter-day photos of Grappelli sometimes show him with a pickup, and sometimes he went electric in the recording studio, such as on some tracks of a 1973 mixed genre album with Jean-Luc Ponty, which also included their swing tribute "Memorial Jam for Stuff Smith", but neither Grappelli nor Venuti were committed to amplification. Ben Heaney spoke with Grappelli at a concert in England in the early 1980s: "He was playing what I remember to be a blue electric violin with what I think was a silver bridge. [ . . . ] I can't remember what he said exactly but I do remember clearly his dislike of the electric violin."

### ***Ray Nance and Stuff Smith***

In *Dance, The World of Swing*, Stuff Smith, after describing his first introduction to the electric violin, continued: "There isn't much difference between it and playing the violin close up to a good mike. A classical violinist wouldn't use it, because he couldn't get the complete violin tone, but I think a jazzman should use it. You can relax more, because you don't have to press so hard on your strings and your chin, and you can develop more of a technique with your bow and your fingers. You can phrase better than with the ordinary violin, where you have to phrase with your fingers, *and* your bow, *and* your chin. It's much easier with the electric violin, but if you hit a bad note-it's hit! [ . . . ] I imagine you'd hear more swing violinists if violinists would pick up the electrical violin or just use the violin amplifier with a pick-up. All the hoe-down boys in California use them, but a player like Eddie South never did. You do get just a slight metallic tone, but you have to learn how to tune up that amplifier to make it sound like a violin. It's a very good sound for jazz in my opinion. If Ray Nance and I record together, he and I are going to use the same amplifier, so we'll have the same balance. We've tried it, and he's in love with it. He could have benefited from it in Duke's band."

For many years, there were conflicting reports whether Smith and Nance had ever got to record together. Fortunately, they had, in 1964, though the album was never completed. The part-session was not released until the CD era, included on 4CD Mosaic MD4-186 *The Complete Verve Stuff Smith Sessions*. Unfortunately, insoluble licensing problems have led to the set's premature withdrawal, though examples occasionally turn up at auction.

As far as is known, Nance never went electric in the recording studio with Ellington but he did at least once in concert. *Metronome* (January 1941) reported "Duke Ellington uncorked a sensational replacement for Cootie Williams in the person of trumpeter-fiddler Ray Nance, who, playing 'Concerto for Cootie' on his electric fiddle, blew the top off Colgate University Memorial Chapel Thursday night, Dec. 12." The accompanying photo of Nance appears to show a conventional violin with pickup attached. The cable runs behind the violin, just as it does in early 1940s photos of Smith and Perry; in other words, the cable does not plug into the front center bout as it does on the late 1930s Vio-Lectric. Fascinating that Nance featured violin, rather than trumpet, in homage to Cootie Williams whom he had replaced just weeks before; and regrettable that no recording is known. One latter-day album that features a very electric Nance is Chico Hamilton's *Headhunters* for Solid State in 1969.

But we are running ahead. Our overview of the earliest electric jazz violinists, in which Stuff Smith turns out to be the only one with a life-long commitment to amplification, properly stops with the 1950s. From the turn of the decade there is a new story to be told about the development and use of electric violins. It begins in 1958 with the first production solid-body Fender, favored, according to Ben Heaney, by Western Swing fiddlers Wade Ray and Harold Hensley (there exist home recordings of Smith with Hensley along with Buddy Ray, Billy Wright, Jimmy Bryant) but which no jazz violinist appears to have taken up, and the introduction of the Barcus-Berry transducer in the 1960s.

### ***Tail Piece***

Among other early possible uses of electric jazz violin on recordings are two Chicago curiosities. A December 1947 session by Earl Hines, which includes Eddie South, for Mercer Ellington's Sunrise label (not to be confused with another Hines Sunrise session with South plus Hampton musicians the same month) and an early 1950s session by Leon Abbey for Parrott. Although South is not known ever to have played amplified violin, it is just possible that he and Abbey do so on these recordings. The trouble is, audio fidelity on both sessions is poor; the Hines session, in particular, is boxy and muddy. Whether South's unusual tone on "Dark Eyes" and "Honeysuckle Rose" is partly the result of an electric instrument or solely the result of studio and recording acoustics is a moot point, though one suspects the latter. Much the same can be said of 1946 Pittsburgh recordings by Joe Kennedy Jr. The two Hines recordings with South have frequently been reissued, though with incorrect personnel details. One of the two Abbey recordings and the four Kennedy recordings are released on 2CD AB Fable ABCD2-011/12 *I Like Be I Like Bop*, an anthology of early bebop violin.

### ***Acknowledgements***

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### ***Related Reading***

Hugh Davies, "Electronic Instruments: Bowed Strings", *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* (New York, 1984)

Hanno Graesser with Andy Holliman, *Design and Technique of Electric Bowed Stringed Instruments* (Frankfurt am Main, 1998), German and English text

F. H. & V. "Le Violon électrifié", *L'Illustration* (Paris, 12 Avril 1930), description of le violon Makhonine

Benedict Heaney, *Digital Violin: The Story of the Electric Violin* <http://www.digitalviolin.com>

Andy Holliman, *Electric Strings* <http://www.electricstrings.com>

John Schussler, *Bowed Electricity* <http://www.lightbubble.com/bowed>

D. Blaise Kielar, *Electric Violin Shop* <http://www.electricviolinshop.com>

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### **About the Author**

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>