

# 'Dance Time'

## The Life and Times of Peppy Prince

*By Opal Louis Nations*



Peppy Prince, Mercury publicity photo, courtesy Gilles Petard.

It's sad sometimes when fine but ignored artists are tossed aside because they defy 'pigeon-holing'. These unfortunates include those who have played or have recorded as jazz musicians yet have crossed over to r&b and pop music on occasions and those who have played and recorded blues but are identified as run-of-the-mill torch singers of little note. Peppy Prince is in this category because he jumped into all of these musics. He loved playing music purely and simply and wanted to survive as a professional musician.

In February 1945, Joe Liggins recorded his seminal first two-part reading of 'The Honeydripper' at Leroy Hurte's tiny, ill-equipped Bronze studio at 623 East Vernon in Los Angeles. 'Part 1' was simply a solo recording with Joe singing and playing keyboard. Because Joe owned the copyright to the song he was able to record it again a couple of weeks later for Leon René's Exclusive label, this time with a small combo. Both versions were released concurrently, in May 1945. The extra rhythm and bite of the Exclusive remake helped bolster it and made it a monstrous hit, crossing over into the national hit parade charts. Here, 'The Honeydripper' climbed to the thirteenth spot.

Controversy exists as to the drumming on the Exclusive 'Honeydripper' version. Charlie Lange, in his discography to the Jukebox Lil 622 album collection (1988), states that William 'Keg' Purnell sat at the drums. The Fancourt/McGrath Discography (Eyeball Productions, 2007) indicates that Peppy Prince was seated on the stool. This writer is inclined to believe Charlie Lange. Liggins had too little time to form a cohesive unit for the Exclusive recording session and borrowed Purnell from the Eddie Heywood band to fill the date. But we will never know for sure.

We do know that drummer, singer, arranger, bandleader Preston T. 'Peppy' Prince was born in Los Angeles on 26th February, 1909. Peppy, a likeable fellow, was suave and handsome and possessed a warm personality. Peppy's orchestra was a 'party band'. In other words, he set the band up to play any type of music. He did this by keeping up a friendly relationship with all his musician friends in the Los Angeles area. If Peppy snagged a seasonal residence at a swank hotel, he would build an orchestra to accommodate the entertainment requirements. If he found short-term downtown club gigs the next moment, he would break his band down to three or four pieces as he did for instance in 1957 when, utilising the services of Bill 'Buttercup' Ellis on tenor sax and Jessie Simpkins on bass, he supported pop vocalist Georgia Carr.

Although Peppy's skill with the sticks was considered a little more than pedestrian, his voice was good enough to render a ballad exceptionally well. Peppy had two cousins, Wesley (who played bass for Nat Cole's Trio) and Henry (who played piano with Les Hite.) Their music contacts helped Peppy increase his ability to find work. In his teens, Peppy played for the Echols Dixie Rhythm Kings, then, in 1934, replaced Lionel Hampton in the Les Hite Orchestra at the Sebastian Cotton Club in Culver City where he jammed alongside his cousin Henry, Marshall Royal and Buck Clayton. He quit the Les Hite Band and joined Joe Liggins and The Honeydrippers in place of William 'Keg' Purnell in April 1945.

By then Liggins had cut his original version of 'The Honeydripper' for Bronze before signing with Leon René's Exclusive label in March, 1945. Members at that time included Liggins, vocal and piano, reeds-ace Little Willie Jackson, alto and baritone, James Jackson, tenor sax, Frank Pasley, guitar, Red Callender, bass with Peppy or William 'Keg' Purnell on drums.

After sessions with Exclusive, the freshly hired Peppy cut a live version of 'The Honeydripper' with Liggins for the American Forces Recording Service in May 1945. The pre-AFRS Exclusive session, however, had included the catchy 'Doodle-Do-De-Deet' on which Peppy hollers on the chorus.

In September 1947, Peppy and the Honeydrippers using Little Willie Jackson as leader recorded five sessions for the Bihari Brothers' Modern Records (Liggins was still under contract with Leon René.) The only change in the crew was that Eddie Davis had replaced Callender on bass. Callender was most always a sessions man. Peppy can be heard warbling on 'I Ain't Got Nobody' and 'You Can Depend On Me'. That same year Peppy recorded for War Perkins and Roy Milton's Miltone label with a group he had formed called the Modern Squires.

The Modern Squires were made up of Peppy, vocal and drums, Martin Gower, alto sax, Lorenzo 'Buddy' Floyd and James Jackson, tenor sax, Harold Morrow, piano, Joe Lewis, guitar, and Eddie Davis, bass.

In March 1949 Peppy label-hopped to Capitol to drum for Blue Lu Barker and The Dave Cavanaugh Orchestra on one session. Peppy and Liggins joined Exclusive in March 1945. Peppy left Exclusive in 1949 after nine sessions with a line-up much the same as the Modern Records sessions except for Gene Phillips on guitar and Red Callender on bass. With Pasley and Davis returned, they signed with Specialty in January 1950.

Peppy left Liggins in 1950 after four Specialty sessions. He then formed a group named the Sugar Men and in April 1950 recorded his arrangement of 'The Honeydripper' called 'Sugar Man, Parts 1 & 2' supported by the fledgling vocal quartet, the Flames, who evolved into the Hollywood Flames. 'Sugar Man' was issued on John Blackburn's Selective label.



Les Hite Band, Pittsburgh Courier, 28th July, 1934. Courtesy Dan Kochakian Collection.





Peppy Prince Band, 1957: George Orendorff, Dud Stone, Joe Kelly (trumpets); Parker Berry (arranger); Horace Tapscott, Alfred Caspar (trombones); Bill Ellis, Jimmie Evans (tenor saxes); Chuck Waller, Milton Hall (alto saxes); Russ Weathers (bass), Doug Finis (piano); Stan Jamerson (bongos); Peppy Prince (drums/ vocals). Courtesy Tom Reed.

Musicians on the Selective session included Peppy on drums, Henry Bridges, tenor sax, Jackie Glenn, piano, Frank Pasley, guitar and probably Eddie Davis on bass. The Flames were composed of David Ford, first tenor, Willie Ray Rockwell, second tenor, Curley Dinkins, baritone, and Robert Byrd, lead and bass. 'Sugar Man, Parts 1 & 2' was probably cut at the same session as 'Please Tell Me Why' and 'Young Girl' which constituted the quartet's first release.

Liggins' March 1945 Exclusive version of 'The Honeydripper' had topped *Billboard's* Blues & Rhythm chart by August 1945 and had remained on the best sellers list for 27 weeks. 'The Honeydripper' became the biggest-selling blues & rhythm song of the Post-War era. (See John Broven's 'Record Makers & Breakers', where he states that 'The Honeydripper' marauded everywhere, spawning covers by the likes of Jimmie Lunceford, Cab Calloway and others.)

By the close of 1950 Peppy had signed an 'exclusive' contract with Mercury. There he cut one date, in all probability arranged by Maxwell Davis and his sessions outfit. Only two records were issued. The four-song set included solid r&b senders like 'Rompin' And Stompin'" and 'What She's Got Is Mine'. Personnel probably included Jake Porter on trumpet and sessionsman Austin McCoy at the piano. During this period Peppy sat in on one Mercury session with Chuck Norris and two with Little Willie Littlefield and Little Lora Wiggins for Modern. Maxwell Davis arranged and produced the gigs.

In February 1951 Peppy recorded with the Red Caps for one RCA session produced by Leon René in Hollywood. Right on the heels of this, he sessioned for one Red Mack date back at Mercury. Peppy formed another band and (as well as session work) recorded one gig for Johnny Getz's Million Records with Christine Chatman. In all likelihood, altoist Charles Thomas and bassist Warren McQueen sat in on this date. Two singles emerged. These included the highly collectable 'Wino's Lament', a dirge full of pain and self pity.

A novel release turned up on the A-Personality Pre Release label with Peppy featuring a side each fronted by Christine Chatman and Little Willie Jackson. The Little Willie Jackson side, 'Who Put Out The Lights' became a cult classic among rhythm and blues enthusiasts. (See Dan Kochakian's excellent Chatman article in *Blues & Rhythm* 224 for further details.)

Peppy was back with Mercury for one return engagement with Joe Liggins in August 1954. By this point, the Liggins band consisted of Little Willie Jackson, alto/baritone sax, William Woodman, tenor sax, plus old sessions stalwarts Gene Phillips, guitar, and Eddie Davis, bass. This was where Peppy became caught up in the Mambo craze.

He then showed up on Clarence 'Bon Ton' Garlow's stompin' 'Crawfishin'" on Modern's Flair subsidiary. Another Maxwell Davis connection, no doubt through Christine Chatman. The session included Jewell Grant on alto, Willard McDaniel, piano, and the always reliable Red Callender on bass.

Peppy recorded with Chatman for one release on John Dolphin's Hollywood label, with Charles Thompson, tenor, Warren McQueen, bass, and possibly Little Willie Jackson on alto sax. The wonderful 'Work Man Work' (a nod to Eunice Davis) emerged, as well as the instrumental 'The Honky Tonky'.

Still under contract with Mercury, Peppy cut one date with Rollie McGill in June 1955. More other artists sessions followed. In late 1957 Peppy signed with Dootsie Williams who put him on their Dooto imprint. His swinging 'Dance Party' album was released in 1958.

The orchestra included George Orendorff, trumpet, Dud Stone, trumpet, Joe Kelly, trumpet, Parker Berry, arranger, Horace Tapscott, trombone,

Alfred Caspar, trombone, Bill Ellis, first tenor, Jimmie Evans, second tenor, Chuck Waller, lead alto, Milton Hall, second alto, Russ Weathers, bass, Doug Finis, piano, Stan Jamerson, bongos, and Peppy, vocal and drums. Standouts on the album included Fletcher Smith's 'Mean-Po-Gal' and 'Jack Pot'.

**Peppy Prince died in Altadena, California on 6th December, 1985.**

*This article is updated and revised from the booklet notes to a poorly distributed 'Dance Time' CD issued in 2011, for which Opal says he never got paid!*



Label shots courtesy Opal Louis Nations and B&R Archive.



# Preston 'Peppy' Prince Discography (with Peppy Prince as leader)

## Peppy Prince w/Little Willie Jackson:

September 1947

Little Willie Jackson, alto, baritone sax; James Jackson, tenor sax; Joe Liggins, piano; Frank Pasley, guitar; Eddie Davis, bass; Peppy Prince, vocal & drums

MM 640-1 I Ain't Got Nobody

Modern 20-571

MM 642-3 You Can Depend On Me

Modern 20-587

## Peppy Prince's Modern Squires:

Los Angeles, 1947

Peppy Prince, vocal & drums; Martin Gower, alto sax; Lorenzo Floyd, James Jackson tenor saxes; Harrold Morrow, piano; Joe Lewis, guitar; Eddie Davis, bass.

TV 227 A It Must Have Been A Dream

Miltone 227

WP 227 B Mr. Jackson vs. Mr. Floyd

Miltone 227

## Peppy Prince & His Sugar Men w/the Flames:

April 1950

Peppy Prince, vocal & drums; Henry Bridges, tenor sax; Jackie Glenn, piano; Frank Pasley, guitar; unidentified bass. Flames: David Ford, first tenor, Willie Ray Rockwell, second tenor, Curley Dinkins, baritone, Robert Byrd, lead/bass

SE 79 Sugar Man Pt. 1

Selective 118

SE 80 Sugar Man Pt. 2

Selective 118

## Peppy Prince & His Orch:

Los Angeles, 1950

Unidentified personnel, probably Maxwell Davis Orch. With Peppy Prince on drums & vocals

3828 What She's Got Is Mine

Mercury 8216

3829 Emaline

Mercury 8216

3830 Rompin' And Stompin'

Mercury 8220

3831 My Gal

Mercury 8220

## Peppy Prince Orch. Feat. Christine Chatman:

Los Angeles, 1953

Christine Chatman, vocal & piano; prob. Charles Thomas, tenor sax, Warren McQueen, bass, Peppy Prince drums & vocal

AA Wino's Lament

Million 2002

A Run Gal Run

Million 2002

AA Ain't Nothing Shaking

Million 2003

A Hey Miss Harriette

Million 2003

## Christine Chatman w/The Peppy Prince Orch.

Los Angeles, 1953

Christine Chatman, vocal & piano; Little Willie Jackson, vocal, alto & baritone sax, others unknown

B All By Myself (C. Chatman)

A-Personality

Pre-Release 107

A Who Put Out The Lights  
(Little Willie Jackson )

A-Personality

Pre-Release 107

## Peppy Prince & His Orch. Feat. Christine Chatman:

Los Angeles, 1954

Christine Chatman, vocal & piano; Charles Thomas, tenor sax; Warren McQueen, bass; Peppy Prince, drums, ensemble chorus, others unknown

H551 Work Man Work

Hollywood 1013

H552 The Honky Tonky

Hollywood 1013

## Peppy Prince & His Orch:

Los Angeles, 1957

George Orendorff, Dud Stone, Joe Kelly trumpets; Parker Berry, arranger; Horace Tapscott, Alfred Caspar, trombones; Bill Ellis, first tenor; Jimmie Evans, second tenor; Chuck Waller, lead alto; Milton Hall, second alto; Russ Weathers, bass; Doug Finis, piano; Stan Jamerson, bongos; Peppy Prince, vocal & drums

Dance Party

Dooto 430, Dooto LP 240

It Must Have Been A Dream

Dooto 430, Dooto LP 240

Peppy's Idea

Dooto LP 240

Medley: Solitude/I Cried For You/

Penthouse Serenade

Dooto LP 240

Sir Galahad

Dooto LP 240

Mean-Po-Gal

Dooto LP 240

Ghost Of A Chance

Dooto LP 240

Diane

Dooto LP 240

Jack Pot

Dooto LP 240

**NB: Peppy Prince recorded after this date**