We all have our favourite sax players in the worlds of r&b and jazz. Illinois Jacquet, Arnett Cobb and Big Jay McNeely blasted their horns – as did David ‘Bashful Bubber’ Brooks and Willis ‘Gator Tail’ Jackson. But have any readers paid much attention to female horn players? Vi Redd of the International Sweethearts Of Rhythm and Evelyn Young of B.B. King’s band in the 1950s? They could blow the roof off a club with their powerful horn blast! Willene Barton was of particular interest to me for her gorgeous tone, so let’s take a look at this pioneering female sax player.

Willene was born in Oscilla, Georgia, on 21st October 1928, and grew up appreciating music. Her family moved to New York City when she was ten years old and she was self-taught, playing music into her later teenage years at Manhattan High School. After graduation, she studied with Walter ‘Foots’ Thomas – who recorded for Joe Davis’s Beacon and Celebrity labels, and who had played with Cab Calloway. She also learned from Eddie Durham who then had an all-girl group called The Darlings Of Rhythm. Eddie was also the musical director of the International Sweethearts Of Rhythm for a time. Durham remarked that Willene had a tone like Ben Webster, Lester Young and Coleman Hawkins. Eddie arranged for Willene to play a gig with him on guitar, Buddy Tate on tenor sax, Panama Francis on drums and Frank ‘Fat Man’ Humphries on trumpet, and it wasn’t until years later that she realised she had performed with legendary musicians. Willene worked on her breath control to gain power so that her sound would be more full. She was fortunate to witness the Sweethearts in all their glory at the Apollo Theatre on several occasions while she was in high school. She was immediately impressed with tenor sax players Vi Burnside and Peggy Becheers. In 1948, Willene met the Sweethearts’ then musical director Maurice King whose group, The Wolverines, backed Bea Baker, aka LaVern Baker, on several of her earliest recordings on Okeh. King auditioned her at The Hotel Theresa and while he was aware of her raw talent, he didn’t hire her for the group.

But Willene wasn’t discouraged and started her professional career in 1951, but never had the opportunity to play with the International Sweethearts because they had disbanded by that time. Vi Burnside made a big name for herself in the Sweethearts and later formed her own band that debuted at The Baby Grand in Harlem. Willene joined an all-female band called The Coronians and played in the area of Queens, New York.

Willene did play with several of the Sweethearts’ alumnae through the 1950s. In 1952, she auditioned for Anna Mae Winburn in a studio on 111th Street in Spanish Harlem. Even though Willene was an adult, at twenty years of age at the time, Anna Mae said that she would discuss Willene joining the band with Willene’s mother. Anna Mae received permission after promising to look after Willene. Willene packed up and joined the former Sweethearts’ leader who formed a twelve-piece band for a show tour that starred Peg Leg Bates and a singer, a comedian and dance troupe.

Willene had seen Peg Leg perform at Radio City Music Hall and was surprised to learn that she would be in the backing band. Willene, who played fourth tenor, didn’t solo very often. She was the only member of the band who did not have extensive professional experience. Willene told Kay D. Ray, in preparation for the film, ‘Lady Be Good – Instrumental Women In Jazz’, that she was: “terrified all the time” as she was “dumped” right in the middle of the band and “had to catch on” immediately.

Willene said that Anne Mae “was all business” and was a strict leader. Willene learned throughout the tour from the professionals in the band and became proficient on her horn. Anna Mae reduced this band from twelve pieces to Maxine Fields on trumpet, Eloise Thompson on alto, Willene on tenor sax, Lorraine ‘Jazz’ Walsh on piano; Eileen Chance on bass; Pauline Braddy on drums and Anna Mae on vocals. Willene recalled playing through the south, and Kentucky, in particular.

When the group played the Ebony Lounge in Cleveland, Vi Burnside was in the crowd and asked Willene if she could play her horn. Willene agreed and watched and listened in amazement as Vi stirred the audience to a frenzy. The following week, Willene visited Gleason’s where Vi let Willene play her horn. Willene impressed the crowd and found her horn stuffed with money. Even with this great acceptance, Willene knew she wasn’t in Vi’s league; Vi called Willene “that little child.” Anna Mae’s group toured the USA, sometimes staying on the road for six months at a time. Willene was with this band for about six years.

Willene then formed a group with Myrtle Young, ex-tenor player from the Sweethearts, that lasted until 1955. In this group were Hettie Smith on drums, who became a politician in Buffalo; Gloria Bell on bass, who married George Coleman, sax player with Lionel Hampton, and Regina Albright on piano. They played at the swanky Crawford Grill Number Two and at The Pine Room of the Parker House (formerly the Granville Hotel) in Pittsburgh.

Shortly after that, Willene started her own group called The Four Jewels with Regina Albright on piano; Gloria Bell on bass/vocals and Hettie Smith on drums. In mid-November, 1954, The Pittsburgh Courier called The Jewels ‘one of the hottest all-girl combos...who score on every date’. The Four Jewels played a successful stint at the Stage Lounge in Chicago before embarking on a cross-country tour.

It was difficult for female musicians to be taken seriously until they proved themselves adept musically. Willene recalled in an interview that she was constantly told that she had to have an act. She countered that her act was her sax playing and that she didn’t tell stories or perform a comedy routine. At that time, the highest praise for a female artist was to be told that she played like a man! Yoko Suzuki of the University of...
Willene met Charlie Parker in a club on 135th Street. He asked her if she was playing a matinee the next day and then asked her permission to play with her group. Parker walked out, but didn’t return. Willene never saw him again.

After The Four Jewels disbanded, Willene formed a group in 1956 with two male musicians, Gildo Mahones on piano and George Tucker on bass. They played at Connie’s Inn, an integrated club located across the street from Small’s Paradise (7th Avenue near 135th Street) in New York City.

Willene gained a measure of notoriety via Jet magazine that revealed her full Ben Webster-styled tones change to all-out rocking. ‘Little Brown Jug’, a ditty that goes back to the big band days, gets a full reworking in a jumping Willis Jackson-style sax honk-fest.

Other numbers feature Selby and Barton battling in a straightforward competition on exciting r&b jumpers. Twelve of the thirteen numbers on 'Thar She Blows' were reissued as 'The Feminine Sax' on Design Records – a division of the budget label Pickwick Records of New York. Two tracks from 'Thar She Blows' were bizarrely released as 'The Magic Fingers Of Merlin And His Trio – The Swingin' Hi-Fi Organi' and was released on Bravo LP K-126. Bravo was a budget label from Long Island and boasted such 'hot talent' as Jan Hubati And His Gypsy Orchestra, Pedro and His Amigos and Hap O’Hallian. ‘Seven Eleven’ and Barton’s Blues’ were changed to ‘Snake Eyes’ and ‘Vincent’s Last Stand’. Merlin’s real name was Van Talbert.

Selby also recorded one 45 for ABC-Paramount in 1959 and at least four singles for the A-F label in the 1960s; one disc on this label I have heard is a straight gospel coupling. Selby also featured on 'The Rocking Tenor Sax Of Eddie Chamblee' on Prestige LP-7321 and backed Ronnie Turner of Eddie Chamblee’s ‘Swinging Hi-Fi Organi’ and was released on Bravo LP K-126. Bravo was a budget label from Long Island and boasted such ‘hot talent’ as Jan Hubati And His Gypsy Orchestra, Pedro and His Amigos and Hap O’Hallian. ‘Seven Eleven’ and Barton’s Blues’ were changed to ‘Snake Eyes’ and ‘Vincent’s Last Stand’. Merlin’s real name was Van Talbert.

Willene would only reveal that her ‘sponsor’ was a nice man she had met in a big car that Willene was seen driving. Continuing her confidential nature, Willene never revealed her secret, even to fellow musicians. In late, 1959, Willene gained a measure of notoriety via Jet magazine that revealed her and her accomplishments. She noted that while black newspapers of the 1950s described her ‘feminine beauty and heterosexual attractiveness’, male musicians whom Suzuki interviewed described Barton ‘as a strong “dyke” saxophonist’.

Perhaps male musicians saw the talented Barton as a threat and thus sought to denigrate her and her accomplishments. In the film, ‘Lady Be Good – Instrumental Women In Jazz’, Willene said that skepticism of females playing good jazz was always evident and that when “you go into the clubs with your horn, they would look at you and as soon as you get up on the stage, the women would sort of look at you – ‘Oh, my God! Don’t embarrass us’. And then when you started to play, then everybody seemed to enjoy it. The women would smile. ‘Oh, see that! Women can do that!’ Willene quickly proved herself and went from novelty to respected jazzwoman.

During this period, Willene became friendly with Eddie ‘Lockjaw’ Davis who managed her for a short time. In New York City, Barton played with many of the stellar male tenor players of the day, including Illinois Jacquet, Ben Webster, Sonny Stitt and Gene Ammons. Not only did they sit in with her group for a few numbers, but she was welcome to join their bands whenever she visited the clubs where they appeared. Willene was excited to meet the musicians and singers whose records she had owned as a youngster. Willene described 7th Avenue as “a heavy place for all entertainers. One night, you may see Sarah Vaughan come in or you may see Sammy Davis or you may see Ray Charles.”
the two formed a band that lasted into late 1960. Smith had played with
Lionel Hampton's orchestra from 1952 to 1953 and then recorded with
Ham in 1958, but got married and moved to Queens where she worked
with Willene.
Barton was able to record one single under her own name for the
Newark-based Sky-Mac label under the direction of pianist/arranger
Robert Banks who was involved with the New Jersey scene throughout
the 1950s and 1960s. The 'A' side, 'Rice Pudding', was a tribute to Booker
T and The MG's huge 1962 hit, 'Green Onions', but instead of an organ
lead, Willene paves the way with some powerful horn work. The flip
side, 'Bossa Nova Twist', is exactly what its name implies, a bouncy sax
led Latin dance number. Her second single for Sky-Mac is an uptempo
reworking of the popular hit, 'Walking My Baby Back Home' backed by
Willene's plaintive deep-toned saxy version of 'As Long As He Needs
Me' from the musical 'Oliver'. Even though Barton saw decent success
with Selby and others, she became disillusioned with the rock 'n'
roll juggernaut of the 1960s and took a day job and only played occasional
gigs in the New York City area.
Willene occasionally worked with The Jazz Sisters at east coast clubs
in the 1970s and appeared at The Kool Jazz Festival at Carnegie Hall on
4th July, 1981. Willene recalled that about twenty years earlier, she was
in the mezzanine watching one of her idols, Illinois Jacquet, play on the
Carnegie Hall stage and that she stood where he played. It took a while,
but Cobi Narita, the director of the Universal Jazz Coalition, enticed
Willene to perform more frequently and formed a band for Willene to
lead.
This group may have included Bertha Hope on piano; Lucille Dixon
on bass; Nydia Mata on percussion and Bernadine Warren on drums.
Barton was pleased to be appreciated by the new audiences who
enjoyed her jazz stylings.
In New York City, Willene played with trombonist Al Grey in January,
1982, and at The Village Gate with Gloria Coleman on piano and
Bernadine Warren on drums in a Jazz Revue with several male
musicians.
Willene was a featured musician at the International Jazz Festival in Bern
in 1983. In mid-1984, Willene Barton and The Universal Jazz Coalition
Jazzwomen
played a free
gig in New
York's Central
Park and
Willene toured
Europe with
singer Sandra
Reeves
Phillips,
played with
her group at
the Citicorp
Market, Chase
Manhattan
Plaza and
at The Jazz
Gallery in the
early to mid-
1980s.
John S.
Wilson of The
New York
Times wrote
high praise for
Willene when
she was a member of The Big Swing, a six piece band
that played at The Aspen Club on West 20th Street.
Wilson described Barton as providing 'a strong solo
voice in the big-toned Coleman Hawkins-Chu Berry
tradition' on such numbers as Paul Williams' r&b
hit 'The Hucklebuck' and a fast-paced version of
'Sweet Georgia Brown'. Willene performed as late as
1993 with The Big Apple Jazzwomen with r&b
pianist/leader Sarah McLawler for gigs in the New
York area.
Willene decided to retire due to health problems
and also because, as she told Kay D. Ray, she
"never wanted to be an old lady with a double chin
playing the saxophone." Willene passed away on
27th September 2005 in the New York area; she had
taken a gig in Flushing.
Willene Barton could honk with the best of
them and was able to coax sweet notes from her
horn, but sadly, she won't be remembered in the
league of male saxophone players. With excellent
performances preserved on wax, we'll be able to
hear Willene Barton, 'that little child', honking and
blasting her sax as a seasoned professional!

Sources:
Special thanks to Kay D. Ray whose generosity in providing her
video interview with Willene Barton is most appreciated. For anyone
interested in Kay's excellent DVD 'Lady Be Good – Instrumental
Women In Jazz' – Produced, Written and Directed by Kay D. Ray,
2007 (Kay D. Ray Productions), contact Kay at kaydray@comcast.
net
'American Women In Jazz – 1900 To The Present – Their Words, Lives
and Music' by Sally Placksin (Wideview Books, 1982).
'California Soul – Music of African-Americans In The West' – edited by
Jacqueline C. Dje Dje and Eddie S. Meadows (University of California
'Stormy Weather – The Music and Loves Of A Century Of Jazz Women'

Thanks to Eric LeBlanc and Susan Fleet for research assistance.
## Willene Barton Discography

### Dayton Selby Trio Featuring Willene Barton
- *Day By Day*, Gateway: Cincinnati, Ohio, 1956
  - Day By Day
  - Too Close For Comfort
  - Blues #2
  - Blues #1
  - Little Brown Jug
  - Dayton’s Dance
  - I’ll Never Stop Loving You
  - Blues #3
  - Seven Eleven
  - Breaking The Blues
  - Blue Moon
  - In The Still Of The Night
  - Barton’s Blues

Above LP reissued as ‘There She Blows’ on Hollywood LPH-15
Hollywood was a New York City label, an affiliate of Paramount Enterprises.

### Dayton Selby - Willene Barton
- ‘Teenagers Dance The Tonky Honk’, RCA Victor EPA 4055
  - Teenagers Tonky Honk
  - Barton’s Blues
  - Little Brown Bug
  - Dayton’s Dance

‘Little Brown Bug’ and ‘Teenagers Tonky Honk’ also released as a 45rpm disc
and same takes are probably included in LP listed below:

- ‘Teenagers Dance’ – The Kids, vcl*; Dayton Selby, organ; Willene Barton, ts; Jimmy Sedlar, vcl**
- New York, mid-1957
- Hop-A-Do* – RCA Victor LPM-1540
- Keep Walkin’ (Sweet Talkin’ Baby)**
- My Happiness Is You
- Teenagers Honky Tonk
- You’ll Remember Me*
- Dayton’s Dance
- Little Brown Bug
- Don’t Talk To My Friends**

*The Feminine Sax – Rock ‘n’ Rhythms of The Dayton Selby Trio Featuring Willene Barton*
- Willene Barton, ts; Dayton Selby, organ; unknown bass and drums
- Brooklyn, NY, 1957
- Too Close For Comfort
- Blues No. 2
- Blues No. 1
- Little Brown Jug
- Dayton’s Dance
- I’ll Never Stop Loving You
- Blues No. 3
- Seven Eleven
- Breaking The Blues
- Blue Moon
- In The Still Of The Night
- Barton’s Blues

### Willene Barton
- Willene Barton, tenor sax, and Her Trio; unk. gtr; drums; Robert Banks, arranger/organ
- Newark, NJ, c. 1963-64
- 71 Rice Pudding – Sky-Mac 1001
- 72 Bossa Nova Twist – Sky-Mac 1009
- Walking My Baby Back Home – Sky-Mac
- As Long As He Needs Me –

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**By Dan Kochakian**

Label shots and album covers From the Dan Kochakian Collection