

“New Orleans' Sweet Emma Barrett and her Preservation Hall Jazz Band”--Sweet Emma and her Preservation Hall Jazz Band (1964)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by Sammy Stein (guest post)*



Sweet Emma

Emma Barrett started playing piano aged seven and by 1910, aged just 12, she was performing regularly in bars and clubs in New Orleans. She had a strident, barrelhouse way of playing and quickly became a popular musician. Her penchant for wearing a red woven cap and garters with Christmas bells attached which jingled their accompaniment to the music, earned her the nickname of “Bell Gal.” She was also dubbed “Sweet” because of her artistic temperament apparently. Before forming her own band, Barrett played with Oscar “Papa” Celestin's Original Tuxedo Orchestra from 1923-1928 and, when that band split into two parts, Emma stayed with William “Bebe” Ridgley in his Tuxedo Jazz Orchestra until the mid 1930s when she began performing with trumpeter Sidney Desvigne, violinist player Armand Piron and bandleader, drummer and violinist John Robichaux. After a break from 1938 until 1947, Emma returned to music, playing at the Happy Landing Club in Pecaniere, which led to a renewed interest in her. In the late 1950s, after working with trumpeter Percy Humphrey and Israel Gordon, Barrett formed a band with Percy and his brother Willie, a clarinet player.

In the 1960s, Barrett assembled and toured with New Orleans musicians in an ensemble called Sweet Emma and The Bells. She also recorded a live session at the Laura Lea Guest House on Mardi Gras in 1960 with her band: “Sweet Emma Barrett and her Dixieland Boys: Mardi Gras 1960.” It was not released until 1997 on 504 Records. In 1961, she made another recording for Riverside as part of their “New Orleans: Legends Of Jazz” series. Suddenly, Emma found recognition outside of New Orleans. with the Preservation Hall band followed but

Barrett felt most comfortable in New Orleans. In 1961 she, along with Percy and Willie Humphrey, began playing regularly at the Preservation Hall, which had now moved one door along St. Peter street and transformed from an art show house into a bone-fide performance venue and run by Allan Jaffe.

A medical student named Henry Blackburn was present at the opening of Preservation Hall in October 1961 and from the outset he wanted that music to come to Minneapolis where there was an active scene in traditional New Orleans Jazz. He organized Jass Sponsors, Inc. from 1961-1963, through which a group of Minnesota people backed jazz concerts, guaranteeing against losses and accepting no profits--an interesting use of the old term for jazz in the name. In effect, Jass Sponsors Inc. offered an "unrefusable offer." They sponsored the first tour of a Preservation Hall Band anywhere: to the Tyrone Guthrie Theater and the University of Minnesota in July 1963. So successful was the tour that it was repeated in 1964. By that time Preservation Hall, under the ownership of the Jaffe family, had its own label and they and Jass Sponsors Inc. had a recording made of the concert--which they released as "New Orleans Sweet Emma Barrett and her Preservation Hall Jazz Band." The line up on the record is Barrett, Willie Humphrey on clarinet, Percy Humphrey on trumpet, "Big" Jim Robinson on trombone, Alcide "Slow Drag" Parageau on bass, Emanuel Sayles on banjo and Josiah "Cie" Frazier on drums. This ensemble, apart from Sayles and Robinson, made up the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. The recording was produced by Allan Jaffe.

The Preservation Hall Bands now toured regularly, becoming part of a major renaissance of traditional New Orleans jazz. The Sweet Emma Barrett concert was probably the longest and also the best selling recording. It has liner notes written by violinist, composer, jazz historian and collector William Russell who was central to the post war renaissance of New Orleans traditional jazz and head of America Music Records. Henry Blackburn added a commercial line or two next to the liner notes for sponsorships at the request of Allan Jaffe and his wife Sandra. It was hoped at the time that the model would be copied in other communities, stimulating further revival of the traditional jazz scene more widely.

Later, the Sweet Emma Barrett recording was re-issued by Ben Jaffe, son of Allan Jaffe, the original Preservation Hall owner; they emerged in 1976 in a two-volume CD set.

This recording encapsulates the essence of New Orleans Jazz played in the mid 1960s. At the time Barrett was 66 and in the most powerful phase of her career, particularly due to her ongoing association with the Preservation Hall Jazz band--where she was the center of attention, wowing audiences with her personality and talent. Even after a devastating stroke in 1967 left her only able to play with her right hand, she made another recording back on Riverside Records in 1968 and continued to perform occasionally until within a few months of her death in 1983.

This recording does justice to the atmosphere of a live performance as each song is introduced by Percy Humphrey on MC duty, amid clapping and general noise picked up from the audience members. "Basin Street" sees the band introduced one by one and as they are introduced, they swell the sound of the number, with the final member being Emma Barrett herself, who is introduced as "Sweet Emma The Bell Gal."

There is an energy and joy in this music which still works today; from the heavy handed rhythmic piano playing on “Basin Street,” to the romp which is “Little Lisa Jane” sung by Willie Humphrey with Emma and the boys providing backing vocals over riotous accompaniment. Barrett provides emotive vocals on “Closer Walk With Thee” and her creative arrangement of “When The Saints Go Marching In,” with Percy Humphrey's vocals, countered beautifully by Emma's voice and a delirious clarinet solo from Willie Humphrey, is incredibly uplifting, as is “Do Lord” with an intricate banjo introduction from Emanuel Sayles.

The sound created by New Orleans jazz bands in the mid 1960s is impossible to recreate today, which is why this is such an important recording. The near perfect combination of a powerful female leader, backed by an outstanding Dixie ensemble, is unlikely to occur, or be as popular again.

The recording is also important for other reasons. Sweet Emma Barrett was a strong woman but although she toured with her bands, appeared on the cover of “Glamour” magazine and was written about in publications in the US and Europe, as a female lead in the mid 1960s she would have had to tolerate a lot of misogyny and racism and it is a testament to her and Preservation Hall that she was fronted as a vital musician for the venue. She led the Preservation Hall Jazz Band on several tours and dealt with patronizing attitudes from male performers by matching them in talent and eventually leading her own band, so thus helping to remove barriers. In spite of all her touring, Barrett felt most at home in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

Barrett excelled in an era when gender restrictions meant limited opportunities. Part of the affection with which she was held came from her indomitable personality. She was known to have a dry wit and be handy with double entendres. She distrusted banks, doctors and planes. She preferring to keep her savings with her in a red purse which she took everywhere--even on stage--and even after she was robbed twice on the street. When the band toured, Barrett would be put on a train ahead of the rest of the band where she would isolate herself in a carriage with a hatbox of food for the journey. She continued to play even when unwell and was verbally abusive to Doctor Blackburn, who looked after some of the Preservation Halls musicians. She was also known to sometimes sleep sat upright in a chair, perhaps in someone else's room, and to often engage in long, drawn out phone calls. Yet such was the respect she gained that her demands directed at Preservation Hall staffer Chris Botsford for cakes or other items, and her snappy retorts to adoring fans, were tolerated and seemed to diminish her popularity not one iota.

In spite of never learning to read music, her talent was unparalleled, and she could switch keys and transpose at will. Her humor and sassy delivery on stage, along with her musicianship made Emma Barrett a beloved and popular musician both in New Orleans and across America. After her stroke in 1967, Barrett continued to play from her wheelchair and made another recording on Riverside records in 1968. There is possibly no better way to capture the essence of New Orleans Preservation Hall music in the mid 1960s than this 1964 recording.

Sammy Stein is a columnist, reviewer and author of “All That's Jazz” and “Women In Jazz--The Women, The Legends and Their Fight.” She has won the Jazz Times Distaff award and was a nominee for Jazz Book of the Year with the Jazz Journalists Association. Sammy has curated a

festival in London and several series for radio as well as covered live performances for the BBC.
Her website is: <https://www.sammystein.org/>

*The opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not reflect those of the Library of Congress.