

# THE NORMAN BOWDEN STORY

(Part 2)

by Opal Louis Nations

In 1942 Norman recorded for Decca with the Harlan Leonard Orchestra but does not remember the details of the session. That same year, Norman sessioned with **Hazel Scott** on the soundtrack to Roy Del Ruth's lengthy M.G.M. musical, "Broadway Rhythm" featuring among others **Ginny Simms** and the **Tommy Dorsey Orchestra**. Norman also gigged with Louis Armstrong and worked for two years with blues pianist **Nellie Lutcher**. He did an eighteen-month run at the Club Royal on Broadway. The Club Royal gig found Norman in a trio with **George Mason** on bass and "**Monk**" **McFaye** on drums, a hot, tight little outfit.

In 1944 Norman played on the radio soundtrack to the **Orson Wells Show** on CBS as a member of the **Zutty Singleton**

Americans who rarely saw themselves portrayed in a respectful light.

Norman, on the other hand, returned to club circuit work by joining a swing quartet called the "**Red**" **Minor Robinson Band** with Robinson on drums, **George Mason** on



*Sonny Clay Band ca. 1933*

*Norman Bowden Front Row far left, Monte Easter 2<sup>nd</sup> from far left, Big Jim Wynn 2<sup>nd</sup> from far right  
(Photo courtesy of Norman Bowden - All Rights Reserved)*

**Band.** Norman had replaced "**Mutt**" **Carey** a month before the show folded. That same year Norman cut one session with the Zutty Singleton Band for Capitol Records. This was the date that produced "Crawfish Blues" and "Bonnie's Bounce."

Continuing his career in movies, Norman played a member of a radio station orchestra in **Michael Curtiz's** 1947 Warner Bros. Production of "The Unsuspected" starring **Claude Rains** and **Constance Bennett**. Rains played a radio celebrity who plans to murder his niece. A decade later Norman played a sideman in **Allen Reisner's** "St. Louis Blues," a portrait of **W.C. Handy** starring **Nat King Cole**, **Billy Preston**, **Mahalia Jackson**, **Eartha Kitt** and others. The movie, although panned by the critics, met with popular reception among African

bass, **Art Hillery** at the piano and of course Norman on trumpet. Norman continued to play with the unit off and on until recent times.

Norman retired from showbiz in 1961 but returned to the club circuit in 1967 after being able to find substantial employment. In 1977 Norman was invited to play **Charlie Shavers** in the Tommy Dorsey Band in **Martin Scorsese's** "New York, New York" starring **Robert De Niro** and **Liza Minelli**. "**Jake Porter** was asked to play Shavers, but he couldn't do it, so they asked me to do it. This wasn't the first time I'd filled in for Porter. It's happened a number of times," says Norman. "People learned they could sorta rely on me showing up," he adds.

Norman also showed up in 1982 on the

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MTV soundtrack of Jackie Cooper's "Rosie: The Rosemary Clooney Story" starring **Sondra Locke** and **Tony Orlando**. He followed this by a cameo in **William Graham's** "Cindy," a made-for-TV black Harlem adaptation of the Cinderella fairy tale starring **Charlaine Woodward** and others. Also for television, he was featured in two episodes of **The Nell Carter Show** — "Joey goes to New Orleans" and "All of me."

Norman seems to have tried his hand at everything to pay the bills — big bands, movies, TV and now TV commercials. He started out in 1986 with ads for Coca Cola Classic. He was



*Red Robin Quartet ca. 1958*

*(Red) Minor Robinson - d, George Mason - b, Art Hillery - p, Norman Bowden - tp*  
*(Photo courtesy of Norman Bowden - All Rights Reserved)*

making commercials for Bud Light in 1995 and Dole Pineapple in 1997-1998. He has recently been heard in ads for General Electric. A few years ago Norman played with organist **Earl Grant** at Harrah's in Lake Tahoe. In 1995 he started into the video medium with appearances in musical productions by **Quincy Jones** and **Donnie Osmond**. He also made a brief appearance on the "Louie Louie" video project.

Still in the business of pleasing people by making music (which in all likelihood is the key to his youthful appearance), Norman and his combo is currently in residence at Club Louisiana, Slauson and Overhill Drive. You can catch him there Sundays between 4 and 8 p.m. May he go on forever.

- Opal Louis Nations
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With the help of Norman Bowden