

MEL BLANC, PORTLAND JAZZ BABY

Mel Blanc: Musician

Notes by **Dennis Nyback**, Oregon Cartoon Institute's film archivist

Mel Blanc was born in 1908. He was still a child when the Original Dixieland Jazz Band introduced New Orleans Jazz to the national audience through their Victor recordings in 1917. As jazz advanced from that point Mel learned to play the violin, viola, Sousaphone and other instruments. In 1923 he made his first appearance on Portland radio singing along with his own ukulele accompaniment. Soon after that he dropped out of Lincoln High School to pursue a career as a professional musician. He worked with at least three Portland jazz and dance bands in the Northwest in the Twenties.

In one of those bands he played with Del Porter who in 1928 formed the singing quartet The Foursome and headed for stardom in New York. You can learn more about what Del did after that next week here at Speakeasy Night at The Secret Society. In addition to playing in jazz bands Mel also played in vaudeville theater orchestras. In 1927 he became the leader of the orchestra at Portland's Orpheum theater, making him the youngest orchestra leader in the United States.

While Mel was maturing as a musician America was living through The Jazz Age. In 1923 [The New Orleans Rhythm Kings](#) made their first recordings in Richmond, Indiana on the Gennett label. In 1924 Louis Armstrong left King Oliver's Band and went to New York to star in the Fletcher Henderson Orchestra. In 1926 Jelly Roll Morton made his initial records with his great [Red Hot Peppers](#) band and Bix Beiderbecke was cutting sides with the [Frankie Trumbauer Orchestra](#).

In 1927 Mel began appearing as a regular on the KGW Hoot Owls radio show. He also continued to work as a musician and would do so through the Twenties.

In 1928 Rudy Vallee began appearing on radio. He was soon a nationwide sensation. He started as a saxophone player but his slight singing voice was perfect for radio which made him the first of what became known as a crooner. The story of his life was turned into the film [The Vagabond Lover](#) in 1929 and in 1930 he published his autobiography [Vagabond Dreams Comes True](#). Our show begins with him in the 1931 Betty Boop cartoon [Kitty From Kansas City](#).

That will be followed by the 1929 film [Black and Tan](#) featuring Duke Ellington and His Cotton Club Orchestra. It also features Fredi Washington who would go on to star in the first filming of the Fannie Hurst story [Imitation of Life](#), and also appear in other films. The featured trumpet player is [Arthur Whetsol](#). [Black and Tan](#) was made by Dudley Murphy. He was an interesting guy. His father was the head of the art school at Harvard. Prior to making [Black and Tan](#) Mr. Murphy co-directed the Fenand Leger surrealist film [Ballet Mechanique](#). In the thirties Mr. Murphy worked in Hollywood, directing [The Emperor Jones](#), among others.

The next film will be [His College Chums](#) starring Eddie Peabody, the Jimi Hendrix of the banjo, made in 1929. Eddie is supported by Hal Kemp's Orchestra. All the films tonight are from the Nyback Collection. When just a boy Mr. Nyback saw Eddie Peabody at the Clark County Fair which had a big influence on his life.

Part Two:

Louis Armstrong was the greatest jazz star of the Twenties and arguably of all time. A Rhapsody in Black and Blue is from 1932. The first person you see is Sidney Easton. Louis appears after Sidney is knocked unconscious, dreams he is the king of Jazzmania, and demands to see Louis perform. Louis then appears and does two songs long associated with his career, I'll Be Glad When You're Dead and [Shine](#).

Ruth Etting then appears in the 1929 film [Favorite Melodies](#). Miss Etting was a very popular singing star of the Twenties and Thirties. Her life story was told in the 1955 Hollywood film [Love Me Or Leave Me](#) where she was portrayed by Doris Day.

The evening will conclude with Dudley Murphy's other film of 1929, [St. Louis Blues](#), which features the Empress of the Blues Bessie Smith in her only filmed performance. The man who abuses her is played by the dancer Jimmy Mordecai. The other woman is played by [Isabel Washington](#). She was the sister of Fredi Washington. In 1934 she married Adam Clayton Powell Jr. at the Abyssinnian Baptist Church in Harlem. A crowd of 3000 showed up. The orchestra is led by [James P. Johnson](#). The [Hall Johnson Choir](#) backs up Bessie. The arrangement of St. Louis Blues was by the composer W. C. Handy with assistance by [John Rosamond Johnson](#).