

The Sid LeProtti band in 1914

In a FB message from Dr Rainer Lotz last year, a film clip found at the Rick Prelinger Library¹ was stated as showing unknown musicians. This silent film clip was also recently mentioned in the IAJRC Journal in an article by David Drazin.² The film primarily shows dancing couples but we can also see glimpses of the musicians in the background. Nothing is known about when, where or by whom this film was made and nothing is known about the musicians shown. It has been suggested that the film was shot around 1914.



A still from the beginning of the film

The musicians are shown below in close-up stills from the film.



However, a little research can reveal some facts. It has been suggested that the movie probably was shot on the West Coast around 1914. A study of Tom Stoddard's *Jazz On The Barbary Coast*³ will reveal that one of the most influential orchestras in San Francisco at this time was Sid LeProtti's *So Different Jazz Band*.

¹ (https://archive.org/details/0633_Gould_can_5423_4_11_34_02_10)

² Dave Drazin, *African Americans Who Appear as Jazz Musicians in Silent Movies*, IAAJRC (International Association of Jazz Record Collectors), Vol 49. No. 3, Fall 2016.

³ Tom Stoddard, *Jazz on the Barbary Coast*, Heyday Books, Berkeley, 1998. (Originally published by Storyville, 1982.)



Sid LeProtti's So Different Jazz Band, San Francisco, c. 1915. (L to R Clarence Williams, Reb Spikes, Adam "Slocum" Mitchell, Sid LeProtti, Gerald Wells, unidentified drummer.)

A comparison of the film stills and the photograph in the Stoddard book (p.45) will show that three of the musicians undoubtedly are the same as in the film clip: Sid LeProtti, piano; Adam "Slocum" Mitchell, clarinet, and Gerald Wells, flute. The Stoddard photo shows a sextet without a cornet but with a string bass (Clarence Williams) and a baritone sax (Reb Spikes) and an unidentified drummer.

The film clip shows a sextet with a cornet player in the upper right corner – although only the movements let us believe he is playing a horn – and a blown bass, played by a musician of much lighter skin color than the photo's string bassist. The bass man is mentioned by LeProtti as a "... *baritone euphonium, at first. My euphonium player caught \$2,500 in the Louisiana Lottery, so he got too rich to work, so we had to change over and get Reb Spikes to play baritone sax with us.*" The cornet player is barely seen in the film and remains unknown. As for the drummer, he and his "traps" look to be the same in the film clip and in the photo and could be Georgia Huddleson, mentioned by LeProtti. So from this, we can conclude that the film clip probably was shot before the Stoddard photo and perhaps in 1914.

Another question is where the film was recorded. In the early days of filming, most scenes were shot in sunlight outdoors or in roofless studios - and the climate and light of course was the reason why California became the US film center. This film was perhaps shot in a street, perhaps Pacific Street, outside a dance venue, or else in an open studio. Nothing much is seen from the house or wall in the background, though. Most likely, the film was shot in San Francisco since even though LeProtti played in Los Angeles in 1916; this was while Reb Spikes was with the orchestra.

Moreover, the picture shown on page 19 in Sandor Demlinger and John Steiner's book *Destination Chicago Jazz*⁴ is also from the same dance session. It is not clear if the Demlinger/Steiner photo is taken from the film clip – which is cut and partly damaged - or is a photo shot at the same time. The photo is a little wider than the film and a little more directed to the left, at least enabling us to see the cornet player although we actually can't see he is playing a cornet. And Sid LeProtti is also shown much better than in the film. In fact, we can also see more of the wall with an oval sign. Undoubtedly, the Demlinger/Steiner photo is from the same session and therefore not from a Chicago dance hall as stated in the book. (This is unfortunately not the only error in this otherwise interesting book.) According to the caption, the photo was donated by Nellie Lewis dancing with a man named "Pet Davis". This couple is also seen in the film clip but not in the exact position as in the film.

⁴ Sandor Demlinger and John Steiner, *Destination Chicago Jazz*, Arcadia Publishing, San Francisco, 2003.



Photo from the Demlinger-Sandor book.

So what we see in the film clip is the only film with Sid Le Protti and also a rare view of legendary clarinetist "Slocum" Mitchell. And the film gives us, of course, a unique glimpse of contemporary Afro American dancing in around 1915.