

George Brashear in Sweden

Bo Lindström

This is an abridged excerpt from the book

OH JOE, PLAY THAT TROMBONE THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF GEORGE L. BRASHEAR.

George Brashear was born in 1894 in Texas but the family soon moved to Los Angeles. George had, along with his brothers, a problematic youth and spent many years at the Whittier School. Here he became a prominent athlete and also learned to play the trombone. Released on his 21st birthday, he moved to the Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, becoming a top athlete and musician. After his studies, he became a teacher at Tuskegee before freelancing as a musician in St Louis. He played on the River with Fate Marable and Louis Armstrong in 1920. He was then recruited by Fletcher Henderson for the Ethel Waters tour and stayed in New York after the tour, recording with Fletcher Henderson. After an engagement with the Runnin' Wild Broadway production, he left for Europe, freelancing all over the Continent. He then was engaged by Swedish revue master Ernst Rolf.



George Brashear with Ethel Waters 1922. (Coursery Konrad Nowakowski)

During the 1920s, Rolf produced revues that were praised for their dazzling sets, first class actors and stirring music. He was also a lyricist and composer of popular songs and recorded his first song in 1910. Throughout his career, he made over eight hundred recordings. He often used jazz - or what he and the audience thought was jazz - in his shows. He also made frequent trips to the main amusement cities of Europe – Berlin, Paris, and London – to find new attractions. It is very plausible that Rolf on one of his trips met with George Brashear and lured him to Sweden, arriving at the end of March 1927.



Ernst Rolf

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The first visa application sheet has been lost, but it permitted George Brashear to work in Sweden from March 22 until June 22, 1927. Probably, this application was sent in by the Ernst Rolf administration before Brashear arrived. On August 16, clearly too late, another application was handed in by "*Ernst Rolfs Musikförlag AB*". In this application is stated that Brashear was employed in the Rolf revue. He subsequently received a work permit valid until October 1, 1927.

The 1927 Rolf Revue

Rolf opened his 1927 summer revue in Gothenburg sometime in April 1927. George Brashear then probably worked in the pit orchestra, led by Björn "Nalle" Hallden, a pianist, composer and conductor born in 1862. The revue was a great success and sometime after the premiere, Dajos Bela was added with a "jazz orchestra". It is not clear if Brashear also played in this orchestra, but it is very plausible since a news item from June 1st states that the Bela orchestra made half of the revue orchestra up.

However, Bela's engagement ended at the end of May, and already on June 1st, a new orchestra leader performed and the "*First and Biggest Swedish Jazz Orchestra*" [sic] was featured. The new leader was Pierre De Caillaux "*coming directly from His Majesty's Theater, London*".



Pierre De Caillaux in 1922 and 1931

Pierre De Caillaux was a Creole pianist, born in Lorain, Ohio, 7 November, 1897. With some mutual friends, it is very possible that Brashear and De Caillaux had met and even played together before. De Caillaux might even have been instrumental in the Rolf engagement. The De Caillaux orchestra seems to have played until August, when the revue was completely renewed. A national tour with this edition was held until October 23, 1927, when Rolf ended the season.

Among the new acts, the new conductor, Pierre de Caillaux, drew most attention. He proved to be a real acquisition – what a find! Whit him at the conductor's desk, the "first Swedish jazz orchestra soon be created – the start was promising. There was a new overall air, speed temperament, finesse – and no wonder, because a more suggestive conductor has rarely been seen. Caillaux is furthermore a thoroughly educated musician – graduated first prize from Musical Royal Academy in London, pianist, composer and experienced conductor. That he was fighter pilot during the war has of course nothing to do with his musical qualifications, but perhaps with his personal qualifications. His triumph with Rolf was undisputable.

Brashear, now perhaps temporarily out of work, published an ad on November 29, 1927, looking for jobs as a trombonist.



Dagens Nyheter, November 29, 1927

In a free translation this ad reads:

SLIDE TROMBONIST George Brashear (black gentleman), popular from Rolf's revue and with longstanding practice on the continent, is available for immediate engagement in Stockholm. Moderate fee claims. Reply to "Modern dance music" Törnbloms advertising agency, Stockholm.

Medical Gymnastics

On September 28, George Brashear handed in a prolongation of his visa and this time he filled in and signed the application himself. He now stated "Mr. Rolf and Professor E Boström" as sponsors to his application. The purpose of his stay was now given as "*Study Swedish Gymnastics and Massage*". He also stated that he was employed by Mr. Ernst Rolf as a theatrical artist. This application was approved with a work permit until December 1, 1927. From this application, it is evident that Brashear by now had met with Ernest Boström.

Ernst Fritiof Boström was born 23 October 1886. Nothing is known about Ernst's childhood or schooling, but he made his military service for four months as an infantry private. In some way, he got interested in massage and studied massage and physiotherapy in Stockholm

However, his ambitions were much higher and in 1910, he emigrated to USA and graduated at the University of Minnesota and received a Ph.D. from New York University. In October 1917, he was appointed Professor at Upsala College, a private college founded in 1893 by the Swedish-American Augustana Synod, a conservative Lutheran church body with roots in the Swedish immigrant community.

In 1923 he married Amelia (Amy) Hedvig Larson, born in New York in 1900 by Swedish parents. In mid-June 1925, the family relocated to Sweden.

Ernst Boström officially opened the Uppsvenska Gymnastiska Institutet in Stockholm in January 1928.



The first ad from Uppsvenska Gymnastiska Institutet, January 15, 1928 and the house at Schéelegatan 2, Stockholm.

In due time, Brashear renewed his visa application on November 30, 1927. This time he applied for a visa valid until June 1st, 1928. His reference now was Professor Boström only and the purpose stated was "*To study Swedish Medical Gymnastics*". This application was approved without any work permit

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- logical as Brashear did not indicate any engagement with Rolf this time. Brashear gave his address as 28, Skeppargatan, third floor.

Brashear filed a new visa application on April 28, 1928. The reason for his stay was now given as *"To study medical Gymnastics. I wish to be permitted to work with Mr Ernst Rolf as Theatrical Artist."* As a reference, *"Prof. E. Boström, Schéelegatan 2, first floor"* is given. This application was denied by the National Board for Health and Welfare. The decision was given to Brashear along with an official letter from the police:

George Lorenzo Brashear's passport has on May 28, 1928, been submitted to the Foreign affairs bureau of the Stockholm Police in order to be given to Brashear along with the message of the visa refusal.

The decision was based on the new laws concerning foreigners. Especially for musicians and artists, the situation with competition from foreign musicians was problematic. This was a situation that could be found all over Europe and the unions in France and England put strong pressure on the governments to restrict work opportunities for foreign artists. Most European countries demanded visa and work permit for visits more than three months. Sweden had had the same laws for foreigners since 1914 and with the hardening European situation; Sweden was the last country to accept foreigners with very little control. This situation became precarious and debated in the spring of 1927. In the discussions, clear tendencies to protect Swedish jobs for Swedes could be traced. A new bill was then sanctioned on January 1st 1928.

The Swedish union for musicians, Musikerförbundet, had strong arguments in their official journal, Musikern, in the July 1, 1928 issue. Despite earlier protests from the Union and the information that 400 Swedish musicians were unemployed in April, the National Board for Health and Welfare had continued to issue visas with work permits.

The editor page of Musikern contains both general criticism of the way authorities were handling the situation as well as more specific cases. After describing two cases, the editorial then states:

Also a third and similar case has recently come to our knowledge. This concern an American musician (negro) who already during the last summer [i.e. 1927] was and also during the current year is employed by revue director Rolf at his theatre in Stockholm. This musician asked a few weeks ago admission in the Swedish Musician Union, and this caused the Union Secretary to investigate if the musician in question had "clear papers". The Foreign Department told us by request that the musician had no permit to work as a musician in this country, as he in the visa application had stated that he during his stay in Sweden only should follow a course at Gymnastiska Centralinstitutet. Following this information, the Union secretary informed the passport bureau and already the next day the mentioned offense was duly prosecuted.

The editorial was right concerning the last visa application but Brashear did have a work permit during 1927; in fact Rolf had handed in the first visa applications with the explicit purpose for work as a theatrical artist. Moreover, the reference to GCI was of course wrong. It is not known what the "prosecution" really meant, but Brashear on June 7 handed in a new visa application. This time he stated his purpose as: *To play with Dir. Rolf. To study medical Gymnastics.* He also stated that he was a Member of Swedish Musician's Union and boldly stated: *I desire visa to work.* Professor Boström also gave this affidavit.

This application was received by the National Board for Health and Welfare on June 13 and was approved - probably after some negotiations with the Musicians Union - on June 20 with a permission

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to work until October 1st, 1928. This shows that the Union probably now had accepted the facts and at last made Brashear a Union member.

Since Boström officially started his Institute in January 1928, Brashear got his tuition more or less as a private student and in this way helped Boström to form the courses. With this arrangement, Brashear also was able to work nights with Rolf.

Brashear then on September 18 handed in a prolongation of his visa until January 1, 1929. He now gave reference to Doctor Ernest Boström, Uppsvenska Gymnastic [sic] Inst., Schéelegatan 2-I. This application again states that Brashear was a Union member and that he still is working for Ernst Rolf as a musician. This visa application was approved with a work permit until January 1st, 1929.

A news item appeared in March 1928, in free translation, that also contained factual errors and some typical racial statements of the time:

Utterly continental [sic] negro at Hasselbacken

A very continental negro will show up at Hasselbacken. This is mr Georg Braksheare [sic], coal black, university educated, genuine negro with snow-white pearly teeth. Childhood friend of miss Josephine Baker. [sic] Slide trombone virtuoso, known to the Stockholm audience from his participation in Chocolate Kiddies [sic]. He has now promised to cheer the Stockholm people up at a spring ball at Hasselbacken, arranged by an old well-known Stockholm social club, the S. K. Society. Mr Braksheare [sic] resides otherwise in Sweden in order to study physiology. An unusual combination, but such things happen in the best of negro families.



The Hasselbacken event was also advertised in Svenska Dagbladet, March 17, 1928.

From this ad, we can see that another event (Masquerade) took place at Hasselbacken the same day in the main restaurant/showroom and that the "Brashear event" was held upstairs in the banquet rooms, with a capacity of 300. The orchestra announced was an octet. No information on this orchestra has been found

Contrary to the news item, Brashear could not have been a "childhood friend" of Josephine Baker. However, it is not at all unlikely that he had met with and even performed with Baker during his previous European years. Although there is no information available, it could also have been possible that Brashear had appeared with Chocolate Kiddies as a substitute during one of the tours that took place after the show breakdown in Copenhagen autumn 1925. For the Stockholm audience, though, the reference to Chocolate Kiddies wrongly gave the impression that Brashear had been with the Chocolate Kiddies/Sam Wooding appearance in Stockholm in 1925 - and they actually that time also appeared at Hasselbacken.

Ernst Rolf had a new revue opening in April 1928 in Gothenburg. In a Stockholm photo from a rehearsal in May, one trombonist can be seen, and his complexion is darker than the other artist's. This man is Harry Hednoff, born in 1896. His father was Harry Lewis, from the Fisk Jubilee Singers, touring in Sweden in 1895. His mother was a Polish girl working in Sweden. Hednoff was adopted and his stepfather got him musical education and he worked in a military brass band until 1919. Hednoff played in different dance bands until 1928 when he is said to have played with Ernst Rolf.

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Harry Hednoff 1926



The revue rehearsal photo from Stockholm 1928

This photo was shot at the time the infected schism between the musicians union and Rolf/Government took place. Most probably, Brashear temporarily was substituted by Hednoff – or they both were employed with Brashear temporarily absent at this rehearsal. According to his visa history, Brashear worked for Rolf all summer and also in the fall.

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The 1928 Rolf Revue

The 1928 Summer Revue started rehearsals in Gothenburg early in April and the Gothenburg premiere was on April 22. The entourage – 80 persons – then moved to Stockholm and the premiere was on May 12 at Circus in the presence of King Gustaf V. For the 50 chorus girls, American dancer Floyd Du Pont (1895-1937) was contracted for choreography. He was the “inventor” of the *Heebie Jeebies* dance and also featured this dance in the revue Pierre De Caillaux, seated far left in the first row in the photo, was still leading the Jazz orchestra, although it this time was not named in the ads. No doubt, George Brashear was in this orchestra.

Nothing is known on the music performed but in an ad from Polyphon Records some of the tunes from the Rolf revue are stated: *Riala Jazz, Underneath the Weeping Willow, Niagara, Love and Kisses, Heebie Jeebies, Messin Around, Blue Heaven, and Bandoola.*

The revue was shown until end of July when Rolf was taken ill. He could continue early in August and closed in Stockholm late in September. After a few days in Malmö, the revue moved to Copenhagen on October 19.

It is not clear if all musicians did go to Copenhagen; in any case George Brashear could perhaps not leave the country, risking his Swedish visa.

Resuming US contacts

Brashear wrote two letters to US newspapers in October 1928, stating that he now had finished his studies in Sweden. One letter published in The New York Age tells us his story:

"Former Sports Director At Tuskegee Gets Degree As Gymnast In Sweden
Georges Lorenzo Brashear, former physical director at Tuskegee and at Lincoln University, Missouri, who has been in Stockholm, Sweden, for more than two years, writes that he has recently graduated and received a degree as medical gymnast from the Uppsvenska (Medical) Gymnastiska Institutet. Mr. Brashear is also a musician and will be remembered by New Yorkers as a former member of Fletcher Henderson's Orchestra and a member of the orchestra of Miller and Lyles' "Runnin' Wild" show. He is a native of Los Angeles and writes in part as follows: "Editor. The New York Age: "Please receive this report and at your action [sic], you may inform your readers of a step in progress made by a race man. Though the road is always rough, with high obstacles, I have fought my way to a near victor"
After more than two years in this country learning the language, etc., I have been in constant attendance at the Uppsvenska (Medical) Gymnastiska Institutet, under Dr. E Bostrom. I have now graduated and received my degree as medical gymnast. This degree is issued only by the state government of Sweden and one must qualify in the following subjects for the degree: chemistry, physics, anatomy, microscopic anatomy, physiology, pathological physiology, histology and the theory of electro-therapy, the science of massage and kinesiology. "The Swedish newspapers and magazines have given me honorable mention in that I am the first race man to come to Sweden on 'educational adventures' to learn their language and to graduate from one of their schools.

It is not known if Brashear stayed in Sweden until the end of his visa or if he left late in the autumn 1928. In any case, he most probably left for Paris, France. He then played with Noble Sissle at the Ambassadeur in Paris summer 1930 and subsequently toured Spain before going back to New York in September 1931.

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George Brashear and Tommy Ladnier, Paris 1930



George Brashear in Paris 1930

Back in New York, George Brashear then made a career as a Massotherapist and died in 1968.