Band of Brothers

The story of Erskine Hawkins and His Orchestra

1933-1942

By

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The story of the Erskine Hawkins band is a story of brotherhood. Brotherhood in the literal sense because two of the best jazz soloists in the band were brothers—tenor saxophonist Paul Bascomb, and his trumpet-playing younger sibling Wilbur "Dud" Bascomb. And brotherhood in the larger sense, of friendship, commitment, mutual respect, joint sacrifice, and loyalty among the men who made up the Hawkins band.

What eventually became the Erskine Hawkins *(shown at left)* band in the mid-1930s evolved from various groupings of musicians who came mostly from Birmingham, Alabama in the early 1930s. Their youth, strength, idealism, wisdom, musical talent and solid musical training were bonds that held them together for many years. In a rigidly racially segregated society where often brutal segregation was rampant and legally (and illegally) enforced, and in a music business often run by dishonest promoters and businessmen, the Afro-American Hawkins band survived somehow, and eventually thrived. Their success was yet another bond that held them together.

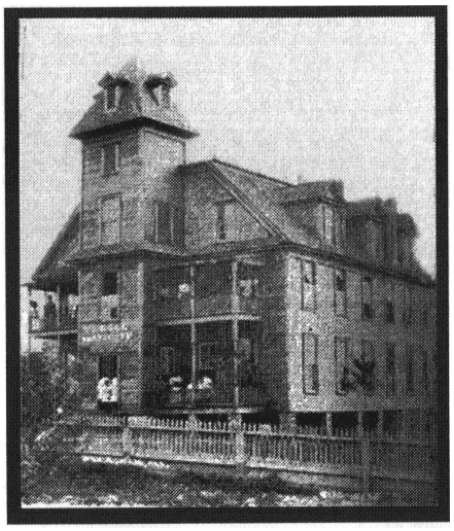
The remarkable story of the Erskine Hawkins band began in the Gothic Deep South of the 1920s, with all of the implications inherent in the term "Jim Crow," including the concept later enunciated in the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education,* that racial segregation as practiced then in the U.S. resulted perforce in separate and *unequal* accommodations and facilities for the races. Whites and blacks lived separately in white and black worlds, and the black worlds were inferior in almost every material sense to the white worlds. The result was continuing widespread poverty and ignorance in black communities, and separate and unequal employment and educational opportunities that all but ensured ongoing poverty and ignorance among the vast majority of Afro-Americans in the Deep South.

What the Jim Crow enforcers of racial discrimination could not degrade or destroy however was the pride of African-American communities, and the burning desire of many blacks to better themselves, despite the long odds against any such self-improvement in the Deep South. There was in the 1920s a segment of the black population of the Deep South that resolved to break out of poverty by creating opportunities for Afro-Americans to excel. The leaders of these communities established black organizations of all sorts that would allow members of their communities, especially the young, to participate in the same activities as whites. These leaders for the most part were not nationally known, but were local people who were strong-willed

visionaries who were looked up to by local black people.The organizations they created, which were almost always chronically underfunded, nevertheless became havens for black youths seeking a path to a better life. Paramount among these were black schools run by idealistic and often charismatic black educators, where knowledge of many different trades and arts would be imparted to the young. A number of these visionary leaders would play fundamental roles in the story of the development of what eventually became the Erskine Hawkins band.

Erskine Ramsay Hawkins was born on July 26, 1914 in Birmingham, Alabama, the oldest of five children, who evidently were born in close succession after him. "Hawkins was born in the Enon Ridge area of Birmingham to Edward Hawkins and Carey Snead Hawkins. …(A)fter his father's death, his mother moved with him and his four siblings to the home of her parents." *Tuxedo Junction…Right Back Where I Belong,* by Carol P. Ealons (2013), Ardent Writers Press page 83, hereafter (Tuxedo/page reference)

John Chilton reported that Hawkins's father was killed in World War I.[1] Erskine himself remembered, "…they had to lift me up to see the coffin." *The Swing Era-1942-1944, Erskine Hawkins,* by Frank Driggs (1972), Time-Life Books, page 47; hereafter (TSE/page reference.)



So from about 1919, Erskine Hawkins's family lived at Fourth Court north in Birmingham, across the street from the main building of theTuggle Institute *(shown at left)*. The Tuggle Institute was founded in 1901 by Mrs. Carrie A. Tuggle as an orphanage for poor black children. (TSE 43) Young Erskine quickly became fascinated by the activities he observed on the Tuggle grounds, specifically by the outdoor practice sessions of the Tuggle Institute School Band. He especially enjoyed watching the drummers, and soon began to play along with them on old tin cans while he was standing in his grandparents' front yard. (Tuxedo 84)

The Snead family was well known to Mrs. Tuggle. Hawkins recalled: "My grandfather and uncles were carpenters who helped to build Tuggle. Mrs. Tuggle was right close to the Snead family. Her home was only a few yards from our home. …She saw me out in the yard after school when the band would come out, and told my mother 'I'll take that boy and put him in school.' She knew that I liked music, even at that time." (Tuxedo 89)

Hawkins started to attend the Tuggle Institute when he was six years old. Very soon he joined the school's music program, and began to experiment with drums, then alto horn. From those instruments, he moved on to trombone, saxophone and finally cornet. As Hawkins began to get more serious about learning the cornet, he began to study with the school's music teacher, Professor Samuel Foster, who had played with the Ringling Brothers Circus Band. "We called him 'high-C Foster,'" Erskine recalled. "He was the first man I ever heard play altissimo high-C, that's C above high-C. In those circus bands, you'd play two or three hours without taking your horn down." (TSE 47)

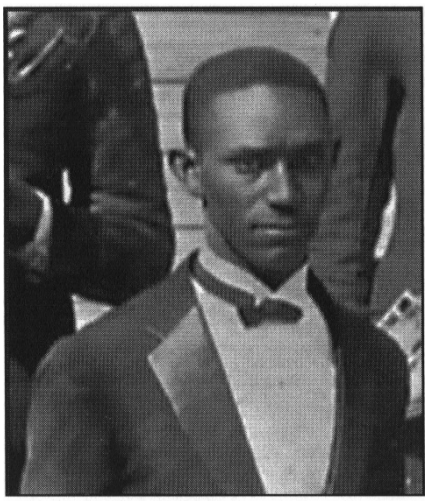
Evidently, Hawkins still lived at home with his mother and siblings during his early years at Tuggle. He recalled how Professor Foster would call him to go to school: "He'd come by my house early in the morning and knock on my window—'Er-skeen, you come watch me blow the trumpet.' He'd have a stick of red peppermint candy. He'd take me on his arm and carry me

over to the music room and set me on a chair so I could listen to him practice." (TSE 47) Under the watchful eye of Professor Foster, Hawkins took to the cornet quickly.

In 1924, when Erskine was 10, Mrs. Tuggle died. "She was buried on the school grounds, and I played 'Taps' over her grave. I was very proud that she had asked for that." (TSE 47) "She was a beautiful lady. She was just wonderful to all of us. I know that she loved me and gave me all the opportunities in the world. …She was 100%, not just to me, but to all of the kids." (Tuxedo 90) *(Carrie Tuggle at right.)*

Hawkins continued to study with Professor Foster for some time, gradually mastering the technical aspects of playing the cornet. He was also inspired by a spectacular young trumpeter who seemed to be influencing a lot of young musicians in the late 1920s—Louis Armstrong. "Armstrong was my biggest influence when I started to play. I bought all his records, and memorized his solos." (TSE 48) After coming under the spell of Armstrong, Hawkins switched from cornet to trumpet.

As Hawkins's trumpet-playing proficiency increased, he met, played with and impressed many Birmingham musicians. Birmingham was a good city for musicians in the 1920s. Among those he met was an older man, Fess Whatley. Whatley's real name was John T. Whatley. *(Shown below left in 1912.)* He was born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama in 1894. He came to Birmingham when he was 12, but could not afford to attend a "regular" school, so he began to study at the Tuggle Institute. He, like all students at Tuggle, was inspired by Mrs. Tuggle. Indeed, he adopted "Tuggle" as his middle name. (Tuxedo 14) Mrs. Tuggle encouraged Whatley's musical development, and he also studied with Sam "High C" Foster from about 1905 to 1910. By the early 1910s, Whatley was teaching music and printing at Tuggle. He moved to Birmingham's Industrial High School in 1917, and went on to teach there for 46 years. (Tuxedo 14)



In addition to teaching, Whatley led his own band, the Saxo-Society Orchestra. "His band was quite successful in Birmingham, playing at both black and white events. They were so much in demand that they had to be booked well in advance, often up to a year." (Tuxedo 15) He used as many talented student musicians as he could, often giving them their first professional experience. He was also a pipeline for musical talent, sending many promising young musicians from Birmingham to Alabama State Teachers College in Montgomery, Alabama. 'Bama State, as everyone called it, was run by an entrepreneurial pedagogue, H.Councill Trenholm. 'Bama State had several student bands, including a military-style band, and a dance band, which in 1929 was led by a 19-year-old student from Birmingham who played tenor saxophone, Paul Bascomb. Even at age 19, Paul Bascomb had total control of his instrument, was a good reader of music. He was quickly acquiring considerable skill as a jazz improviser in the Coleman Hawkins mode. He was also a good-looking lad with a brilliant smile. In short, he was a natural front man for a group of student

musicians. But Bascomb, like all of the other better student musicians at 'Bama State, had to play in the military band as well as the dance band. In the military band he played clarinet.

Trenholm wanted to draw some favorable attention to the 'Bama State military band (and of course to the college itself), so he entered the military band in a competition to be held in Detroit. He then asked Paul Bascomb *(at right, 1941)* if he knew any good young musicians in Birmingham who might be able to strengthen the 'Bama State band. Bascomb consulted Fess Whatley, and in a short time he gathered several young upstarts and sent them to 'Bama State to audition for the military band. This group included two trombonists, Bob Range and Ed Sims, a twelve-year old clarinetist, Haywood Henry, Bascomb's thirteen-year old brother Wilbur, whose nickname was "Dud," and fourteen-year old Erskine Hawkins. (TSE 47) These five passed the audition with flying colors, and as "ringers" began rehearsing with the 'Bama State military band in preparation for the Detroit competition.

Haywood Henry *(below left in 1950s)* remembered this competition well: "It wasn't a jazz band. We were about 30 pieces, playing marches, but we injected jazz into them. We marched by 'Tiger Rag,' we marched by 'Dinah,' and we were quite a sensation doing things that they do at football games now." *The World of Swing* by Stanley Dance, (1974) Da Capo Press, page 206; hereafter (WOS/page designation)

Trenholm's plan worked out well: the 'Bama State band came in second at the Detroit competition, and garnered a lot of favorable publicity for the college. After this exciting event, Hawkins, Range and Sims returned to Birmingham to continue their studies there. Henry, who was also a football player, accepted a football and music scholarship to Alabama State. (WOS 206) Dud Bascomb stayed on at Alabama State to be near his brother, and to study music there. (WOS 193) There must have been a college preparatory program at Alabama State that served the needs of pre-college students.

Erskine Hawkins continued to study the trumpet, play gigs, and work his way through school in Birmingham for the next year. His reputation as a high-note specialist had started by 1930. Many years later he recalled with a laugh, "they used to call me 'Iron Lungs.' Fate Marable offered me a job on one of those river boats when I was 16, but I wanted to stay in school." (TSE 47)

Hawkins would enroll in Alabama State Teachers College in the fall of 1930. Among the other musicians who would enroll there at about that same time were fellow Birminghamians Bob Range, and alto saxophonist/vocalist Jimmy Mitchell. These three musicians were members of the "Revellers" band at 'Bama State, which performed separately from the "Collegians." Before long, Trenholm sensed a spirit of competition between these two bands, and he began to send

them on tours together where they would “battle” each other, to the delight of audiences. Despite the success of this way of presenting these two bands, the musicians themselves implored Trenholm to allow the two bands to be merged into one, with its members being the best musicians from both bands. Trenholm acceded to this request, and the resulting band became the ‘Bama State Collegians that gained fame touring throughout the South in the early 1930s, and became the core of what later would be the Erskine Hawkins band.

In 1932-1933, Paul Bascomb and his brother Wilbur *(shown at left in 1941)* had an opportunity to join what evolved into a professional traveling band, built around a “name.” They were tempted by this opportunity to leave ‘Bama State. The name was “Calloway.” Sammy Lowe, then a fourteen year old trumpeter from Birmingham who was learning how to arrange, was recruited to join the Calloway band by Paul Bascomb. Lowe later recalled what was happening then: “Her name was *Jean* Calloway. She was no relation to Cab, but the placards capitalized on Cab’s name. You could see ‘Calloway’ two blocks away, but you had to get up close to see ‘Jean’. We made twenty-one dollar a week if we worked seven days, eighteen if we worked six, and fifteen if we worked less than that. It sounds terrible now, but it went a long way then, when a hotel cost only three or four dollars a week, and for dinner you spent only a quarter or fifty cents.” (WOS 213) This opportunity quickly proved to be much less than the three young Birmingham musicians had hoped because of lack of work. As soon as they could extricate themselves from this ill-fated venture, the Bascomb brothers returned to ‘Bama State, and Sammy Lowe to Birmingham.

Meanwhile in 1932, another talented Birmingham musician, pianist/arranger Avery Parrish, went to Montgomery to enroll at ‘Bama State and join the Collegians. Throughout the academic year of 1932-1933, the Collegians continued to hone their performance skills and repertoire, and tour successfully throughout the South.

In the summer of 1933, the ‘Bama State Collegians began an extensive tour that eventually would reach New York City. Erskine Hawkins remembered: (After my last year at ‘Bama State), “…we went on tours playing different towns all over the country. The (summer 1933 tour) was going to end up in New York. By then, the Collegians were a jazz band. We had fourteen pieces, and we played at the Harlem Opera House for one week.” (Tuxedo 91) *NOTE: The ‘Bama State Collegians first played third week of November 1933 at the Harlem Opera House, 211 West 125th Street. (WOS 406) The program of music they played “…consisted of novelty numbers, and a compilation in which they imitated the themes of all the leading bands of the day—Duke Ellington’s, Don Redman’s, Earl Hines’s, Cab Calloway’s, Guy Lombardo’s, etc.” (WOS 207)*

Dud Bascomb remembered that 1933 tour well: “…We were supposed to be paying our tuition, but when we came east in the summer, the school put us on a salary of twelve dollars and fifty cents a week. They paid our transport and hotels, but they took the rest of the money and it went towards our schooling in the winter. But we all decided to quit school when we got to New York and played at the Harlem Opera House, a few doors east of the Apollo Theater. When we were there, we ran into a guy called Feets Edson. He started looking out for us. He went and got overcoats for us from a pawn shop, and so on. We were all young. I was the youngest, just going on eighteen. (WOS 193-194)

The ‘Bama State Collegians continued to work throughout 1934 from their base of operations in Harlem, but work was sporadic. Dud Bascomb: “We got forty bucks a week at the Harlem Opera House, and we were all very excited. We then laid around the Woodside Hotel waiting for Edson to get us some dates. We played at the Academy of Music on 14th Street downtown, the Brooklyn Fox Folly, and a few places upstate. Then we went into the Apollo (fourth week of January 1935 (WOS 408), playing the show and a specialty, getting union scale. From there we went to the Ubangi Club, where we had quite a run.” (WOS 194)

After it became clear that the band was going to have enough work to remain in New York, and that Erskine Hawkins was being featured more and more playing high-note trumpet specialties, it became apparent that Hawkins could no longer play the first trumpet book all night, every night, and also play the high-note solos. He was simply wearing himself out. Sammy Lowe *(pictured at right in 1935)* recalled what happened: “After I’d been at Tennessee State for five months, I got a call from Paul Bascomb: ‘come right now to New York to join ‘Bama State’ (and play first trumpet). No amount was mentioned, but it turned out to be fourteen dollars. I quit school. I’m *gone,* you know…” (WOS 215)

At this time (early 1935), the leader of the ‘Bama State Collegians was J.B. Sims. Dud Bascomb explained: “He had been my teacher in high school. He wore tails and sang pretty well, like Cab Calloway, and that is what the people went for.” (WOS 194) But increasingly, the public’s focus was being drawn to Erskine Hawkins’s spectacular high-note trumpet playing. Sammy Lowe: “High-note trumpet stuff was very popular at that time. Louis Armstrong really started it, but Erskine excited the people in New York when he came here. On ‘Shine,’ Louis would usually make ten high Cs, and ten high Fs, where Erskine used to make a hundred high Fs down South. They had played the Harlem Opera House before I joined, and there he would make a hundred high Cs, and then make high F, while the band counted them aloud. It was an absolute sensation! So Erskine had the potential to become a legend so far as trumpet playing was concerned.” (WOS 216) Dud Bascomb explained further: “Erskine Hawkins was one of the best first trumpet players I ever played under. He also played trombone, tenor sax and drums quite well. He never got credit for his lead because they had him play solo. I must have been about fourteen when I met him, and I know what happened to him at ‘Bama State where we were both copying Louis Armstrong solos *verbatim,* like those on ‘Chinatown,’ and Shine.’ That was what Erskine was doing all through the South, playing like Louis. He had no time to think of doing something for himself until he was drawn out front.” (WOS 194)

Sammy Lowe recalled his reaction when he first looked at the first trumpet book Hawkins had been playing: “When I saw that book, I felt like going back home. They had notes like D on up to F and G written on paper! There were some real lip-beaters in there.” (WOS 215)

Lowe went on to describe what was happening in the band when he arrived in early 1935: “When I joined, …our first engagement was for two days in Newburg, New York, and we made

nine dollars apiece according to my diary. (You must remember that when I played in Birmingham, the highest I made was four dollars, so I said to myself *this is it!)* We then laid off from February until the fall, eight months. But we rehearsed every day and played gigs every now and then, enough to keep the hotel man happy." (WOS 219*) (Note: The Erskine Hawkins band played at the Harlem Opera House the second week of April 1935 [WOS 407], and at the Apollo Theater the first week of July 1935. [WOS 408] The same band, as the 'Bama State Collegians, played at the Apollo Theater the first week of September 1935. [WOS 408]) (At left: J.B.Sims with baton, and Erskine Hawkins at the Ubangi Club.)*

Although I have not been able to pin-down the exact time the Hawkins band played at the Ubangi Club, it appears that that lengthy engagement began early in 1936 and ran until October of 1936, when their next important gig started.[2] Sammy Lowe recalled specifically: "in October of 1936, we went into the Harlem Uproar House on 50th Street, at the old Roseland, downstairs in the basement. It was a hard gig. We hit at 7 o'clock and played until four in the morning." (WOS 219)

While the band was at the Ubangi Club, they were signed to a contract to make records for the Vocalion label. Their first recording session was on July 20, 1936 in New York. The personnel of the Hawkins band then was: *Erskine Hawkins, trumpet, directing: Sammy Lowe, first trumpet; Marcellus Green and Wilbur "Dud" Bascomb, trumpets; Bob Range and Edward Sims, trombones; William Johnson, lead alto saxophone; Jimmy Mitchell, alto saxophone and vocals; Paul Bascomb, tenor saxophone; Haywood Henry, baritone saxophone and clarinet; Avery Parrish, piano; William McLemore, guitar; Leemie Stanfield, bass: James Morrison, drums. Lowe, Parrish and Johnson were the arrangers.* The first recording session for the Hawkins band at Vocalion yielded four sides. [3]

The Harlem Uproar House was owned by Moe Gale *(real name Morris Galewski, (shown at right with Chick Webb),* who was also a co-owner of the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem. As a result of their enthusiastic performances at the Uproar House, Moe Gale, who was Chick Webb's manager, also became the manager of the Erskine Hawkins band in early 1937. He immediately began the lengthy process of trying to build the band's name and establish its identity with a wider public. Sammy Lowe: "…he sent us out on a tour with Stepin' Fetchit. That's when I found out about the value of a name in show business. We would stop the show, and then he would come on. To my way of thinking, Stepin' didn't have much of an act, but he would tear up the show too. 'we're going to make it hot for him,' we used to say, 'before he gets on stage.' When

we played in Memphis, Tennessee, people were coming from all around. They loved Stepin' Fetchit, especially the whites. Every night we would lock up the show and think we were making it so hot for him. We did so well, broke records, and got return engagements because a lot of people had been unable to get to hear us. Well, Stepin' was having trouble with the theater manager, about more money I expect, and after an argument, he decided he wouldn't appear. So they put up a big sign saying the entire show would be presented, but without him. And didn't *nobody* come! 'They loved us last week,' we said. 'Why don't they come back to see us?' Then it dawned on me: when the public pays their money to see *somebody else*, it doesn't matter how good *you are.* You're just part of the background." (WOS 220)

As the management side of the Hawkins band tried various strategems to establish a public identity for the band (Hawkins was made the leader by Moe Gale, and J.B. Sims left the band), Hawkins began to encourage the men in the band who could arrange to start writing original tunes. This would eventually pay off in a big way for the Hawkins band, and indeed for Erskine himself. By 1937, there were three highly talented arrangers who were also members of the band: pianist Avery Parrish; lead alto saxophonist Bill Johnson, and lead trumpeter Sammy Lowe. Haywood Henry recalled the early arrangements Avery Parrish *(pictured at right in 1940)* wrote for the Hawkins band: "Avery never studied arranging, but he could sit down and write like he was writing a letter. He could compose on the spot too. Any type of thing you wanted, he could do it. He knew the voicing of instruments, and he did most of *the* arrangements for the band that we didn't record." (WOS 209)

Note: Many of Parrish's arrangements were in fact recorded, including: ***"Strictly Swing," "Swing Out," "Rifftime."*** Dud Bascomb provided his own insights into this: "Avery Parrish did all of the arrangements until Sammy Lowe came into the band. Avery liked Sy Oliver's arrangements for Jimmie Lunceford, so a lot of his were in that pattern." (WOS 194)

Sammy Lowe provided yet another perspective on the arrangers in the band: "Bill Johnson was the one with the formal training. He had been to Marquette University, and we were tight when it came to arranging. He paid me a compliment one day: 'you've got some of the darndest ideas I've ever heard.' Then he showed me what I was doing wrong. In fact he was like a teacher, and I had no qualms about going to him when I had any questions." (WOS 215-216)

As 1938 dawned, the Hawkins band had been on the New York scene for four years. They had worked hard to forge themselves into a disciplined and spirited performing unit. The band's personnel had remained stable. The band had a number of capable soloists including Bill Johnson on alto saxophone, Paul Bascomb on tenor saxophone, Haywood Henry on baritone saxophone and clarinet, Avery Parrish on piano, Dud Bascomb playing jazz trumpet, and of course Erskine Hawkins playing high-note trumpet. The Hawkins band was serious about their music, and serious about achieving success. While they continued to work on their music, Moe Gale continued to work on promotion of the band.

During the swing era, there was, generally speaking, a basic plan that was used by those who managed bands to work toward success. It involved the famous "Three Rs," Radio, Recordings, and the Road. Each of these components complemented the others, but for a band to achieve success, they had to be managed in such a way as to maximize the promotion and income of the band. As Moe Gale increasingly became involved in the management of the Hawkins band,

he followed this plan. As Sammy Lowe recalled, Gale had sent the band out on the road. When they returned to New York in early 1938, he began to present them at the Savoy Ballroom, the famous "Home of Happy Feet," on Lenox Avenue between 140th and 141st. This ballroom was far and away the most popular in Harlem. It had served as the home base and launching pad for the great success of Chick Webb's band, which by 1938 was on its way to national success, along with its vocalist Ella Fitzgerald. Moe Gale was also Webb's manager, and a co-owner of the Savoy Ballroom. The ever-increasing success of the Webb band in 1938, which was given a big boost by their hit recording "A-Tisket A-Tasket," on the Decca label, made on May 2, 1938, provided the Hawkins band with an opportunity to break-in at the Savoy because there was now increasing demand for the Webb band on the road. As the Webb band toured more extensively, the Hawkins band spent more time at the Savoy covering for them. (Gale, ever the cautious and clever businessman, also put Teddy Hill's band into the Savoy quite often during this time as a hedge. He wanted to see which band was the favorite of the Savoy's dancers. He would soon have their verdict.)

A key component to the success of the Savoy Ballroom was the network radio wire that existed there to broadcast band remotes. This had worked to build the success of Chick Webb and Ella Fitzgerald. By mid-1938, the Hawkins band was beginning to be presented on sustaining (unsponsored) live broadcasts from the Savoy. From July 1, 1938 to September 4, 1938, the Hawkins band was presented in no less than twenty-seven N.B.C. Broadcasts from the Savoy.[4] This exposure helped to introduce their music to a wider audience in greater New York and across the nation.

The final of the Three Rs to fall into place for the Hawkins band was recordings. Although the five recording sessions they had done for Vocalion produced records that presented the band in a mostly favorable way, the relatively small distribution network selling the disks was not particularly successful at getting many of the Hawkins band's recordings into a very wide stream of commerce. In order to better the Hawkins band's presence in the American record market, yet not compete with Chick Webb on Decca, Gale was able to get them a contract with RCA Bluebird in the summer of 1938. Victor Records, parent company of Bluebird, was doing well in the swing market in 1938 with the established bands of Benny Goodman and Tommy Dorsey, and to a lesser extent with Bunny Berigan. But in 1938, they launched an all-out assault on Decca's 35-cent swing recordings by signing a host of new swing bands, including Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, Charlie Barnet, Les Brown, Larry Clinton, Jan Savitt and Erskine Hawkins. Bluebird records sold for 35-cents, and were distributed via the vast Victor network of wholesale and retail outlets. The Hawkins band was now in position to really reach a mass audience with its recordings. They made their first Bluebird recordings on September 12, 1938.

As was so often the case during the swing era, when a band started a relationship recording with a label, especially one as prestigious as Victor/Bluebird, many people who knew little about that band's music were suddenly in a position to decide what kind of records that band should make. The people at Bluebird initially had little understanding of the musical orientation of the Hawkins band. Moreover, so much activity was going on at Bluebird recording the many other new swing bands that had recently been signed by the label, that a great deal of thought was

not invested in what would be a good fit musically for the Hawkins band in terms of material. The automatic default then for all A and R supervisors (later called record producers), was to record pop tunes. When Erskine Hawkins and his band learned that the four tunes they were assigned to record on their first Bluebird session were all current pop tunes, they were disappointed. Nevertheless, with the same positive spirit that had propelled this group of musicians through earlier travails, they arrived at a stratagem that would give them a chance to record music they believed showed them in the best light. When the band arrived at the Victor recording studio, Hawkins asked the recording supervisor if his band could record a couple of its special arrangements after they finished recording the four assigned pop tunes. He was told that they could, but that few bands were able to record more than four tunes in a three hour recording session. Hawkins replied that he understood that. He and his band then efficiently recorded the four pop tunes assigned, and then recorded the two arrangements he and his band wanted to record, all within the allotted three hours.[5] *(See Appendix A for a listing of notable recordings made by Erskine Hawkins for RCA Bluebird from 1938-1942.)*

Although the personnel of the Hawkins band remained stable through these months of change and growth, a lingering personality problem existed: Paul Bascomb, a splendid tenor saxophone soloist and attractive stage personality, who was four years older than Erskine Hawkins, and a capable leader of musicians, resented what he regarded as Erskine Hawkins's increasing presence as the band's leader and most recognizable soloist. Bascomb had done a lot of the organizing of the musicians who initially were the 'Bama State Collegians, and then continued providing leadership for these musicians as the band gradually morphed from the Collegians into Erskine Hawkins and his Orchestra. Dud Bascomb filled in the details: "Paul was one of the originators of the band. When he was still a junior in college, he had gone with C.S. Belton's band from Florida. Belton was supposed to be the Duke Ellington of the South, and he had a very good band of seventeen or eighteen men. I think their home was Pallatea, but they worked West Palm Beach and played ballrooms as far up as Cincinnati. Bill Johnson, the guy who wrote 'Tuxedo Junction,' came out of that band." (WOS 197)

All along, Paul Bascomb's jazz tenor saxophone solos were good, and constantly getting better. By the late 1930s, he could stand toe-to-toe with any jazz tenor player and hold his own. His brother Dud provided some perspective: "We had guys who played more horn than you heard on the records. I think we could run over those horns as fast an anybody because we had the know-how. But we used to stick (more-or-less) to the same solos as on the records at dances. (That is what people expected.) But when it comes to playing the horn, Paul *plays!* …We would run into guys who wanted to jam, and we would get together in hotel rooms. Budd Johnson and Paul would sit down every time we'd met up with Earl Hines." (WOS 196) But in mid-1938, perhaps in response to the blandishments of some agent who told Paul he should and could be the leader of his own band, he left the Hawkins band.

Paul Bascomb had not learned the lesson Sammy Lowe had learned when on tour with Stepin' Fetchit. Talent and public recognition do not always correlate. He worked away from the Hawkins band with minimal success for about a year and a half. In that time, the Hawkins band went from a group with potential to becoming one of the most successful black bands on the scene. Paul Bascomb's replacement (sometime in the summer of 1938), was a young man from Florida who was as good a tenor saxophone soloist as Paul Bascomb, having a more edgy sound on his horn (than Bascomb), plus good jazz ideas and excellent technique, Julian Dash.

The fact that the personality problem was Paul Bascomb's, not Erskine Hawkins's was made clear by Paul's brother Dud: "Paul and Erskine didn't get along so well. (But) Erskine and I were very close. Every time I would ask for a raise, he would give it to me, so I had no kick coming." (WOS 220) Sammy Lowe amplified this point: "Erskine Hawkins was and is a *nice* guy." (WOS 220)

Although Julian Dash *(at left)* was not, like almost everyone else in the band, from Birmingham, Alabama, and he was the first newcomer to the Hawkins band in some time, he seemed to fit in quickly, and become accepted by everyone in the band. Soon he was among the band's featured soloists, and a crowd-pleaser.

That the Hawkins band was well-organized, disciplined, and prepared is evident: in their two Bluebird recording sessions in 1938, they completed twelve acceptable masters. Most bands were happy if they got four masters per session. These early recordings document the solid musicianship of the band. Clearly, the stable personnel, strongly individual soloists, and talented arrangers who were contributing original compositions to the band's library, were beginning to give the Hawkins band a recognizable musical identity.

The Bluebird records the Hawkins band made in the first half of 1939 show the band improving, and acquiring a bit of assurance. Their first hit, **"Tuxedo Junction,"** was recorded on July 18, 1939. After its release around September 1, it soon replaced **"Swing Out"** as the band's opening theme song. By the end of 1939 it became clear that its sales were far beyond the average sale of other Hawkins disks. But the metric for a hit record in 1939 was much different from what it became later. If a record sold 10,000 units in 1939, it was considered a success. Anything beyond that ranked it as a hit. Within these parameters, the Hawkins band's recording of "Tuxedo Junction" was a hit by the end of 1939.

Despite Dud Bascomb's assertion that Bill Johnson was "the guy who wrote 'Tuxedo Junction,'" there is more to that story. Dud himself later asserted, "…the last chorus was mine." (WOS 197) However, the composer credits for "Tuxedo Junction" read: *William Johnson, Erskine Hawkins and Julian Dash.* No composer credit has ever been given to Wilbur Bascomb. Erskine Hawkins himself remembered how "Tuxedo Junction" came to be "composed." "I needed one more tune to record at that session. I told them 'give me about a half hour.' So I went in to tune up with Bill Johnson, and I took the rhythm section and *they* put it together." *(In the Mainstream…18 Portraits in Jazz* by Chip Defaa, (1992) Scarecrow Press, Pages 142-145. Hereafter (ITM/page reference.) I find it interesting that Hawkins said *they* put it together, instead of *we* put it together. Also, Hawkins does not mention Julian Dash. My educated guess about all of this is that Hawkins did in fact work with various members of the band, certainly including Bill Johnson and Julian Dash, to create the basic outline of "Tuxedo Junction." Then Bill Johnson, an accomplished arranger, wrote out enough music for the band to play so the recording could be made. When listening to

the Hawkins recording of “Tuxedo Junction,” one notices immediately that solos make up the vast majority of the performance, with simple backgrounds and melodic fragments placed strategically throughout making up the rest. In other words, there was not a lot of writing done for the ensemble.

Usually, with an original whipped-up casually by members of a swing band, composer credits were not worth that much in dollars. But if a tune took off, there could be litigation over composer credits. That never happened with “Tuxedo Junction,” so I think it reasonable to assume that the composer credits actually identify those who were involved in creating the tune.

Hawkins continued: “The band recorded it. They then said: ‘What are you going to name it?’ I asked for suggestions from everybody. My valet said, ‘Why don’t you call it “Tuxedo Junction” since that’s where you’re from?’ And that’s how it got its name.” (ITM 145)

Everyone connected with the Hawkins band was delighted with the success of “Tuxedo Junction.” While its brisk sales generated some much-needed cash for its composers, the financial ramifications of “Tuxedo Junction” were not that great at first. Then something happened that no one could have envisioned, and what had been a hit record was transformed in the next year into a mega-hit, and an annuity for its composers. Hawkins remembered: “Glenn Miller came in as a guest band at the Savoy. He and I alternated on a Sunday afternoon” (ITM 145) *Note: Hawkins’s memory is substantiated by John Flower in his book “Moonlight Serenade…a Bio-discography of the Glenn Miller Civilian Band” (1972) Arlington House, page 108. The date when these events happened was December 24, 1939.* “So when we finished, Glenn said, ‘Hawk. I want to talk to you.’ So we went in the manager’s office and sat down. He then told me that he wanted to record ‘Tuxedo Junction,’ but that RCA Victor told him that he had to see me on account of two bands couldn’t make the same tune on the same label. So he gave me his idea. He said, ‘You make it your theme so that people know that it’s still your number. I’ll play it as a regular number, but you’ll still have it as your theme.’ And that’s what I did. I also gave him the OK to record it.” (ITM 146). And he said one more thing to me: ‘Don’t let anyone record “Tuxedo Junction” for six months after I record it.’”(ITM 146).

At the very time Glenn Miller was having this conversation with Erskine Hawkins, he (Miller) was about to commence his sponsored network radio series (on CBS, for Chesterfield Cigarettes), which would provide an ongoing basis for the increasing popularity of his band for the next 2 ¾ years. His first Chesterfield broadcast would be on Wednesday December 27, 1939. Miller’s canny use of the Chesterfield radio show to promote not only his band, but specific tunes recorded by his band, would yield numerous hit recordings for the Miller band during their entire run on the Chesterfield show, which lasted until September 1942, when he broke up his band to enter the Army Air Force.

Miller assigned the task of refashioning “Tuxedo Junction” for his band to his chief arranger, the highly skilled and talented Jerry Gray. The most obvious difference between the Hawkins band’s approach to “Tuxedo Junction” and the Miller band’s approach is that the tempo of the Miller version is much slower. The Hawkins band performed “Tuxedo Junction” as a loose, jaunty framework for numerous jazz solos. The Miller band’s approach was much more calibrated, with

the entire arrangement building slowly and teasingly to a powerful climax. The first Miller performance of "Tuxedo Junction" that is documented was on the Chesterfield show on February 1, 1940. He recorded "Tuxedo Junction" for Bluebird on February 5, 1940, and promoted it ceaselessly even before his recording of it was issued. By the time it was issued in March, it was already a hit. By the summer of 1940, "Tuxedo Junction" had become a major hit, eventually selling well over one million Bluebird records*. (This was just in the 1940-1942 period. Since then, Miller's recording of "Tuxedo Junction" has sold many more millions of records. Additionally, "Tuxedo Junction" was recorded by many other artists, generating a lot of royalties for its composers Erskine Hawkins, William Johnson and Julian Dash.)*

But in late 1939-early 1940, all of this was in the future. Hawkins's main objective then was to keep his band as strong as possible, constantly refresh the music his band was playing, please the highly critical dancers at the Savoy (and elsewhere), and make high-quality records for Bluebird. The commercial success of Erskine Hawkins's recording of "Tuxedo Junction" gave him and his band some artistic credibility with the people at Bluebird. Although the Hawkins band continued to record current pop tunes as specified by the Bluebird recording executives, more originals composed by members of the Hawkins band were also recorded, and not surprisingly (at least for members of the Hawkins band who saw what was working with dancers at the Savoy), many of these originals outsold the pop tunes they recorded.

As 1939 segued into 1940, the Hawkins band continued to make many good to excellent recordings for Bluebird. Indeed, the ratio of original compositions from members of the Hawkins band to other material, usually current pop tunes being promoted by music publishers, was never higher than in the period from the fall of 1939 into mid-1941. In retrospect, it appears that this time was the golden age of jazz originals recorded by the Hawkins band. In an effort to identify some of the best recordings from that period, I offer the following comments:

"Uptown Shuffle" (recorded on 10/2/39) was composed by Bill Johnson and Hawkins, and arranged by Johnson. It features a string of fine solos: Avery Parrish on piano; Julian Dash on tenor saxophone; Dud Bascomb on trumpet; Johnson on alto saxophone; Haywood Henry on clarinet; then a riff building ending topped by Hawkins's high notes. **"Baltimore Bounce"** (12/20/39) was composed by Sammy Lowe and Hawkins, and arranged by Lowe. It spots excellent ensemble unity and blend, the soprano saxophone of Haywood Henry in the reed mix, muted Hawkins trumpet before Bill Johnson's alto, and then Hawkins soaring on open horn at the end. **"Fine and Mellow"** (12/20/39) is a blues composed by Billie Holiday and recorded effectively by her. The Hawkins version includes a vocal by Dolores Brown *(shown above left)*,, a fine singer with a solid sense of pitch, along with good range and voice quality. Unfortunately, her vibrato got away from her at times. The instrumental soloists are Avery Parrish on piano, whose playing here points in the direction of his soon to be recorded showpiece "After Hours," and Hawkins with a straight mute.

On February 27, 1940, the Hawkins band recorded worthwhile versions of Bill Johnson's composition/ arrangement of **"Dolimite"** *(sic)*, which builds with a fine solo by Julian Dash, on tenor saxophone, a bit of trombone by Bob Range, and Hawkins's open trumpet at the

conclusion. Noteworthy recordings from April 26, 1940 include Sammy Lowe's original **"Midnight Stroll,"** with its clarinet (Henry) and muted trumpet (Lowe) sonority contrasted with the robust unison saxophones. The soloists are: Julian Dash, who gets funky on his tenor sax; some tight ensemble coordination, and Hawkins's cup muted trumpet in the finale. **"Song of the Wanderer,"** composed in 1926 by Neil Moret, was a semi-standard in the swing era. The vocalist here is alto saxophonist Jimmy Mitchell, who became Jimmy *Mitchelle* at some point in the late 1930s as he gained popularity as Hawkins's male vocalist. He does a good job on this, and was very popular with audiences wherever the Hawkins band appeared. I suspect that this tune was arranged by Bill Johnson because of the excellent saxophone soli and his alto sax solo. Hawkins chimes in at the end.

The Bluebird recording session of June 10, 1940 resulted in six masters being made, all of them having at least some wonderful music on them. **"Junction Blues"** composed and arranged by Sammy Lowe, reminds us that the Hawkins band had a strong blues orientation, something that dancers at the Savoy and other Afro-American venues much appreciated. High points on "Junction Blues" are provided by: William McLemore on electric guitar; Bill Johnson on alto sax; an upward modulation ushering in Hawkins on warmly cup muted trumpet; wailing clarinet by Haywood Henry, and Avery Parrish's bluesy piano, once again suggesting "After Hours." **"Sweet Georgia Brown"** is a showcase for tenor saxophonist Paul Bascomb, who had recently returned to the Hawkins band. Despite the fact that he playes well on this recording (and gets some excellent comping from Avery Parrish), I sense that Bascomb may have become weary of playing this "feature" so many times at the Savoy. His playing on any number of other Hawkins records is more inspired. **"Ashes in the Tray,"** is a forgettable pop tune arranged by Sammy Lowe and sung by Dolores Brown, and rescued from oblivion by Haywood Henry's delightful baritone saxophone playing. **"Five O'Clock Whistle"** was another 1940 vintage pop tune (also recorded by Duke Ellington), which includes a tenor sax solo by Julian Dash, cup-muted Hawkins, and saxophone voicings redolent of the Jimmie Lunceford band in its 1940 (arranger) Billy Moore phase.

"After Hours," also recorded on June 10, the insinuating piano showcase for Avery Parrish, is a compendium of blues licks he used quite often in his playing with the Hawkins band. Erskine Hawkins is listed as sole composer of this tune, but Parrish's name is also on the record label: *(Featuring Avery Parrish, Piano.)* Soon "After Hours" eclipsed the Hawkins version of "Tuxedo Junction" as the most requested number in the Hawkins band's book. Sales of its Bluebird recording were quite substantial upon its release in the summer of 1940, and continued steadily for many years thereafter. In fact, the success of "After Hours" was so great and requests for Parrish to play it were so numerous that it resulted in Parrish leaving the Hawkins band reluctantly, in 1943.

Parrish's departure started a train of tragic events that ultimately led to his death. Dud Bascomb recalled the details: "Following the success of 'After Hours,' he decided to stay in California and work on his own. He began to get some nice stakes out there, around $750 as a single in night clubs. The way I heard it, a friend of his came by the club, a young kid, and they decided to go in the bar and get a few drinks. One of the ruffians there came up and wanted to pick at the boy, and Avery took it up. When he turned around to take a drink, …this guy hit him across the head with

a bar stool. It crushed his skull in and a piece of his brain was damaged. When I went to see him in the hospital, they had cut it off, but it seemed to be a part he needed. His hands were paralyzed, but he strengthened them by exercises, …and he did make another record of 'After Hours.' He started working in restaurants, washing dishes and things like that. He was still living with his mother in New York when he went to a place on 127th one night. He was drinking and fell down a flight of steps, hit the same spot again, and died. He was still making good money from 'After Hours.' He'd just gotten a check for $800.00." (WOS 197) (*Note: Avery Parrish died in 1959.)*

It is unclear why there was a five-month hiatus between the June 10 recording and the next one, which took place on November 6, 1940. Presumably the Hawkins band toured throughout much of that time to capitalize on its increasing popularity. Three excellent instrumentals were made at this session. **"Norfolk Ferry,"** composed by Hawkins and arranged by Sammy Lowe, is one of the band's best showcases for swinging jazz solos. This riff-based piece, played at a brisk tempo, features an excellent tenor sax solo by Julian Dash; spiky, agile clarinet from Haywood Henry; tart-toned trumpeting from Dud Bascomb; a bit of guitar by William McLemore; ditto from trombonist Bob Range; and a two-part tenor sax romp by Paul Bascomb; and then a taste of Hawkins's cup muted then high-register open trumpet in the finale.

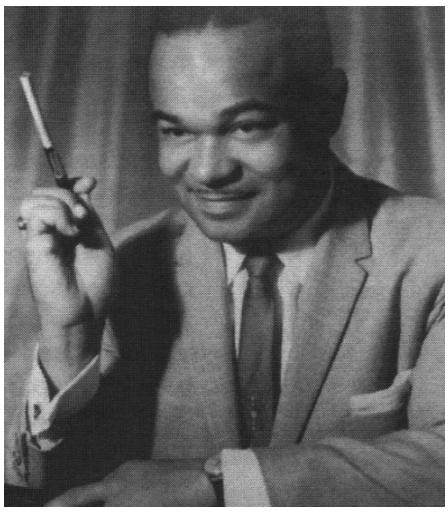
The next tune they recorded that day was **"Soft Winds,"** which had been introduced by the tune electric guitar pioneer Charlie Christian into the Benny Goodman Sextet in 1939. The Hawkins band's music, no matter what the tempo, was always danceable. Here they start off in a relaxed groove. The five-man Hawkins sax section, under the robust lead of Bill Johnson, take the melody, such as it is, playing with admirable unity and swing. *(The melody appears to be 16 bars long; then the jazz solos follow the 12 bar blues form.)* Johnson had a sound on alto saxophone that was bright and full, similar to those produced by Benny Carter and Willie Smith. Julian Dash very often played a very tasty jazz tenor saxophone, as his 24-bar solo here demonstrates. Dash's edgy, robust tone, good jazz ideas and strong swing were admired by many of his tenor sax peers during the swing era. Listen also for the pointillistic syncopated brass backgrounds Dash solos against, the handiwork of Sammy Lowe.

Notice the electric guitar played by William McLemore in the first chorus, then in the transition into Dash's tenor saxophone solo, and then again in the closing bars of this performance. *(The electric guitar was still something of a novelty in 1940.)* The Hawkins musicians no doubt met and in all likelihood jammed with Charlie Christian who frequented the after-hour jazz joints in Harlem, and indeed lived there. Christian's influence on all guitarists in the early 1940s, and indeed for decades after, was enormous.

The next soloist is trumpeter Dud Bascomb. Here he plays two spirited blues choruses against the riffing reeds. People often ask: why did Erskine Hawkins, who was a terrific trumpet soloist, let Dud Bascomb play so many

jazz trumpet solos in his band? The answer is that Hawkins's specialty was his high-note work. Although he was indeed an excellent first trumpeter, a fine melodic player, and flashy high-note artist, he was not a great jazz soloist. Most of his solos were worked out beforehand and notated. He rarely varied them. Bascomb improvised freely and effectively.

Clarinetist Haywood Henry is the next soloist. He starts out in his low register, and flutters his way up throughout his solo, with the riffing reeds and now the brass also gradually becoming more intense behind him. The climax is reached and sustained when the brass leap up an octave, and Hawkins appears, dramatically scattering trumpet high notes over the ensemble. Don't miss first trumpeter Sammy Lowe and his section-mates Marcellus Green and Dud Bascomb's high register shakes behind Hawk's solo. This type of hot playing would (and did) inspire the Savoy's jitterbug experts.



This beautifully paced arrangement was written by Sammy Lowe *(shown at left in the 1950s),* who in addition to being an excellent first trumpeter, wrote most of the arrangements in the Hawkins book over many years. In his post-Hawkins career, starting in the mid-1950s, Lowe wrote many hit arrangements for vocalists like James Brown and Nina Simone, and vocal groups like The Platters, The Four Seasons and The Tokens.

"Nona," another composition/arrangement by Sammy Lowe, is in my opinion, Paul Bascomb's *real* tenor sax showpiece. This tour-de-force opens in a deceptively simple way with saxophone figures and William McLemore's guitar playing against loping rhythm. Bascomb's fluttering entrance is arresting, and launches him on an intense exhibition of all of his capabilities as a virtuoso instrumentalist. The riff swapping between the saxes and brass provide the finale. One should also note the band's overall excellence in these performances. Clearly, by this time, the Erskine Hawkins band was one of the best in the business.

Less spectacular is the final tune recorded that day, **"Put Yourself in My Place."** It was co-composed by Haywood Henry and Avery Parrish, with Parrish making the arrangement. It is taken at an insinuatingly slow tempo, it spots cup-muted brass and solo Hawkins with a cup mute. Henry once again shines on clarinet.

The next Bluebird recording session came two weeks later, on November 20, 1940. Four tunes were recorded, three vocals and one instrumental, **"Riff Time,"** which is a jump tune in the Luncefordian mode composed and arranged by Avery Parrish. It spots Haywood Henry's fluent clarinet and Hawkins soaring throughout the final chorus.

This photo of the Hawkins band purports to be from 1940. I question that for these reasons: Ida James, who is pictured above, was a member (for the first time) from approximately October 1938 until the fall of 1939. She did not return to the Hawkins band until very late in 1940 or early in 1941. Also, Paul Bascomb is not in this picture. He left the Hawkins band in the summer of 1938, and returned in May or early June of 1940, remaining into the years of World War II. I would date this picture as having been taken in late 1938 or 1939, when Ida James was first with the band, and Paul Bascomb was temporarily away.

"I Know a Secret," which was composed by Paul Bascomb and arranged by Sammy Lowe, begins with an almost literal imitation of the style of sweet bandleader Hal Kemp, where Lowe copies Kemp's use of clarinets and muted brass. After Jimmy Mitchelle's vocal chorus, there is a rare and exciting dialog between the tenor saxophones of Paul Dascomb and Julian Dash. Rare on records that is. This sort of thing was often done at some length on the bandstand at the Savoy, and in theaters, as were trumpet exchanges between Hawkins, Dud Bascomb, and occasionally, lead trumpeter Sammy Lowe.

Andy Razaf's standard **"S'posin"** was probably arranged by Sammy Lowe. It again reflects the admiration all of Hawkins's arrangers had for the style of the Jimmie Lunceford band. After Dolores Brown's vocal, Lowe has Hawkins

leading the brass quite distinctively, and then playing a brief trumpet exchange with Dud Bascomb.

The final tune recorded on November 20, **"Tonight You Belong to Me,"** was also arranged by Sammy Lowe (whose versatility was shown by his differing charts recorded on this date), but it includes little of interest, except for a well played saxophone soli after Jimmy Mitchelle's first vocal.

As 1941 began, the Hawkins band was at a peak in terms of its ensemble and solo strength. The personnel, which had been stable since Paul Bascomb's return to the band in early 1940 (at which time the saxophone section expanded to five from four), was once again expanded as Richard "Dickie" Harris was added to the two trombones, increasing that section to three. The personnel was as follows: *Erskine Hawkins, solo trumpet, directing: Sammy Lowe, first trumpet; Wilbur "Dud" Bascomb, Marcellus Green, trumpets; Bob Range, "Captain" Edward Sims and Richard "Dickie" Harris, trombones; William "Bill" Johnson, lead alto saxophone; Jimmy Mitchelle, alto saxophone and vocals; Paul Bascomb and Julian Dash, tenor saxophones; Haywood Henry, baritone and soprano saxophones and clarinet; Avery Parrish, piano; William McLemore, guitar; Leemie "Lee" Stanfield, bass; James "Big Jim" Morrison, drums. Dolores Brown, (soon to be replaced by Ida James, pictured above right) vocals. The arrangers were Lowe, Johnson and Parrish.*

The Bluebird recording session which took place on January 22 was something of an oddity for the Hawkins band in that only two tunes were recorded: **"Keep Cool, Fool,"** a forgettable pop/novelty with a Jimmy Mitchelle vocal. More substantial is the instrumental **"No Use Squawkin',"** composed and arranged by Sammy Lowe. This medium tempo swinger includes a Lunceford-like first chorus, some very fine Paul Bascomb tenor sax, trombonist Bob Range's longest solo on record (in which pays respect to Dickie Wells), a spot of Dud Bascomb's plunger muted trumpet bookending the fluid soli saxophones, and a bright brass ending.

The Hawkins band did not return to the recording studio until May 15, when they resumed its earlier efficiency, recording six titles. Vocalist Ida James's inaugural recording with the band during her second stint as a member, **"Who'se Beatin' My Time With You,"** is a substandard pop tune. Her voice was smaller than her predecessor's, and her vibrato was often wide, but she nevertheless was popular with dancers at the Savoy, and elsewhere.

More true to the character of the Hawkins band is **"Uncle Bud,"** a bluesy sounding original composition/arrangement by Bill Johnson. It starts with some brass and Dud Bascom's plunger muted trumpet, then progresses through a series of good solos by Paul Bascomb, Bob Range, Haywood Henry

on clarinet, cup muted Hawkins trumpet, and then a riffing finale. **"Blackout"** is another Avery Parrish piano feature, which includes powerful brass punctuations (provided by arranger Sammy Lowe) which are more integrated into the performance than those on Parrish's big hit, "After Hours." Hawkins appears briefly on cup muted trumpet. *(At left: Avery Parrish and Erskine Hawkins onstage Paramount Theater, NYC, 7-30 to 8-12, 1941.)*

"Blue Sea" is another original, this time composed by Sammy Lowe and arranged by Bill Johnson. In addition to impeccable ensemble playing, this bright swinger showcases solos in order by: Hawkins, Dud Bascomb on open trumpet, Bill Johnson, Hawkins again, Julian Dash, Haywood Henry on clarinet, and Hawkins again at the end.

The sentimental wedding staple **"I Love You Truly,"** composed in 1912 by Carrie Jacobs-Bond, is surely unique among recordings by the Erskine Hawkins band. It consists of a melodic and slightly ironic vocal group performance by Jimmy Mitchelle, Ida James, "Captain" Ed Sims and Bob Range, who are doing their take on the then fabulously popular Frank Sinatra/Jo Stafford/Connie Haines/Pied Pipers group vocals with Tommy Dorsey's band. Although the Savoy Ballroom always catered to Harlem's most expressive (and hip) dancers, clearly those dancers also wanted this kind of music also, at least on occasion.

The final tune recorded that day is a quintessential Hawkins band swinger **"Shipyard Ramble,"** co-composed by Erskine Hawkins and Sammy Lowe, and arranged by Lowe. The entire first chorus is given over to Haywood Henry, whose robust yet fluid playing on the baritone saxophone is every bit as agile as his clarineting. Henry, who in his post-Hawkins career was a much sought-after studio musician in New York, had a light sound on baritone sax the was very much a precursor to that of Gerry Mulligan. Dud Bascomb follows with a typically rough-hewn open trumpet solo.The Hawkins saxophones glide through a few bars, followed by Erskine's open trumpet, a burst of brass and downward cascading saxophone. Bascomb plays again, this time with a plunger mute, Julian Dash has a bit on tenor sax, followed by William McLemore's electric guitar, and the brassy finale.

By mid-1941, the Hawkins band was flying high in terms of the overall quality of its music, and its popularity. "Tuxedo Junction," which Hawkins began using as his theme in late 1939-early 1940, was making its composers comfortable financially, and was an immediately identifiable tune with the mainstream (that is white) American pop music/swing/jazz audience because

of Glenn Miller's best-selling recording of it. Many other artists were also now recording it. The Hawkins band's recording of "After Hours" was selling very well in the mainstream market. In addition, many of their other recordings were selling well if not spectacularly, reinforcing the band's popularity not only with dancers at the Savoy Ballroom in Harlem, but in many ballrooms elsewhere (including those that catered to white audiences), where the band was being presented by Moe Gale.

Nevertheless, or perhaps because of this "cross-over" popularity, certain commercial forces began to exert themselves on the music the Hawkins band was recording. This resulted is a lessening of the projection of the band's overall musical personality via its records. What makes the timing of this development sadly ironic is that 1941 was a watershed year for recordings and radio performances of original works composed by sidemen in swing bands because of the American Society of Composers Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) ban on radio performances of compositions by its members. While non-ASCAP composers like Billy Strayhorn (a key member of Duke Ellington's musical organization),[6] literally could not write original compositions fast enough to keep up with the demand, there was an alarming dropoff of original compositions by Sammy Lowe, Bill Johnson, and Avery Parrish coming into the Hawkins band's repertoire. Instead, the Hawkins band was now playing and recording more and more pop tunes, and seeking more sales in the mainstream (white) record market. *(Above right: Erskine Hawkins and Paul Bascomb onstage Paramount Theater, NYC 7-30 to 8-12, 1941.)*

As the Hawkins band moved up the ladder of popularity, the sidemen became known to the public, Indeed, they became mini-celebrities within the world of big band swing. Sammy Lowe recalled humorously: "You must remember that this was a group of young fellows that hit New York and were a sensation. And the girls...oo-la-la!" (Tuxedo 103) The Hawkins band was making more money in early 1942 than ever before. Their records were selling well. They were being presented at major theaters and in ballrooms far from Harlem. And of course, they were ensconced at the Savoy Ballroom whenever they returned home from their tours.

Unfortunately, the same hand of fate that rocked the dreamboat of all other young Americans in 1942, World War II, was shaking up the Hawkins band as well. Although Hawkins did not serve in the military during the War, many of his sidemen did. In addition, the musicians' union recording ban, which began

on September 1, 1942, and lasted over two years for Hawkins who was contracted to Victor. These were serious body-blows to the Hawkins band. But the tenacious and calm Hawkins methodically replaced the musicians who left with suitable substitutes, and somehow managed to keep the performance levels of his band very high during the years of World War II.

The Hawkins band that resumed recording for Victor after the recording ban ended in late 1944 was a solid one, featuring the new lead alto/arranger in the band, Bobby Smith. His original composition/arrangement "**Tippin' In**" became Hawkins's last hit for Victor, even though Hawkins would continue recording for the label until July 1, 1950. Unfortunately, the people at Victor were increasingly forcing the Hawkins band into a rhythm-and-blues pigeon-hole, so most of their post war recordings, though always performed beautifully, are numbingly redundant.

Hawkins continued with a big band nevertheless, retaining his sustaining relationship with the Savoy Ballroom through the early 1950s. He also signed to make records for the Coral label from mid-1950 through 1951, and then the King label from 1952 through 1953. Recording dates for these labels were not frequent however. Hawkins finally gave up his big band in approximately 1954.

From the mid-1950s on through the next thirty-plus years, Hawkins worked as often as he wished, and enjoyed the continuing stream of royalties from his many swing era recordings, especially "Tuxedo Junction." He was honored in his hometown of Birmingham, Alabama, and made many trips there to see old friends. Hawkins worked regularly at the Concord Resort Hotel in Kiamesha, New York from 1967 to 1993. He was still working there when he died at age 79 on November 11, 1993.

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[1] "Who's Who in Jazz," by John Chilton (1972), Chilton Book Co. page 137.

[2] The Hawkins band as "Erskine Hawkins and his Orchestra," played at the Apollo Theater the second week of January 1936; the same band, billed as the "'Bama State Collegians," played at the Apollo the third week of July 1936. The same band, as Erskine Hawkins and his Orchestra, played at the Apollo the second week of December 1936. (WOS 408-409)

[3] Subsequent recording sessions for Vocalion took place on: September 8, 1936; April 19, 1937; August 12, 1937; and February 28, 1938.

[4] This information was gleaned from the NBC archives at the Library of Congress.

[5] This bit of information was given to me in a conversation with Haywood Henry when I encountered him at a jazz club in Manhattan in the late 1970s.

[6] Other "in-house" non-ASCAP composers in big bands whose original compositions were being recorded by swing bands in 1941 included: Jerry Gray with Glenn Miller; Ray Conniff and Paul Jordan with Artie Shaw; Andy Gibson with Cab Calloway and Charlie Barnet; Sy Oliver with Tommy Dorsey; Joe Lippman with Jimmy Dorsey; and Billy

Moore with Jimmie Lunceford and Jan Savitt; Jimmy Mundy and Buster Harding with Count Basie; and Eddie Sauter and Mel Powell with Benny Goodman.

Appendix A

Information about worthwhile recordings made for RCA-Bluebird by Erskine Hawkins and His Orchestra 1938-1942.

9-12-1938. **"Rockin' Rollers' Jubilee"** An instrumental pop tune from 1938 composed by Joe Davis, arranged by Bill Johnson. Solos by: Avery Parrish, piano; Wilbur "Dud" Bascomb, trumpet; Julian Dash, tenor saxophone; Erskine Hawkins, trumpet.

"Miss Hallelujah Brown," composed by Benny Davis and J. Fred Coots, probable arranger: Sammy Lowe. Solos by: Parrish, Bascomb, Dash, Hawkins.

"Weary Blues," composed by Artie Matthews, arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos by: Bill Johnson, alto saxophone, Bascomb, Parrish, Hawkins and Parrish.

"King Porter Stomp," composed by Jelly Roll Morton, arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos by: Hawkins, Dash, Haywood Henry, clarinet; Hawkins.

10-20-38. **"Strictly Swing"** an original by Erskine Hawkins, trombonist Bob Range, and Avery Parrish. Arrangement by Avery Parrish. Solos: Johnson, Hawkins, Bob Range, trombone, Henry, clarinet.

"A Study in Blue," an original composed by bandleader Larry Clinton. Arranged by Bill Johnson. Solos: Parrish, Henry, clarinet; Hawkins; Johnson.

"Easy Rider," composed by Shelton Brooks. Arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos: Hawkins; Dash; Bascomb.

4-8-39. **"Swing Out,"** composed by Erskine Hawkins and Avery Parrish, it was used as the band's Opening radio theme throughout 1939, replaced in late 1939 by "Tuxedo Junction." Arranged by Avery Parrish. Solos: Hawkins; Bascomb; Henry, clarinet; Parrish.

"Raid the Joint," an original composed by Erskine Hawkins and Sammy Lowe. Arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos: Henry; Bascomb; Hawkins; Johnson; Henry, clarinet.

5-14-39. **"No Soap (A Jitterbug Jamboree),"** an original composition/arrangement by Sammy Lowe. Solos: Hawkins; Dash.

"Swingin' on Lenox Avenue," an original composition/arrangement by Bill Johnson. It was used by the Hawkins band as its closing radio theme, and commemorates the band's home, the Savoy Ballroom, which was located on Lenox Avenue at 140th Street.

7-18-39. **"Hot Platter,"** composed by Erskine Hawkins and Sammy Lowe; arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos: Hawkins; Dash; Bascomb; Henry.

"Gin Mill Special," composed by Erskine Hawkins and Sammy Lowe; arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos: Bascomb; Dash; Hawkins; Parrish.

"Cherry," composed by Don Redman; arranger uncertain, but probably Sammy Lowe. Vocal by Jimmy Mitchelle. Solos: Johnson; Bascomb; Hawkins.

"Tuxedo Junction," composed by Erskine Hawkins, Bill Johnson and Julian Dash. The arrangement was in the nature of an informal "head" arrangement prepared at the recording session, pulled together by Hawkins and Johnson. Solos: Hawkins; Bascomb; Johnson; Henry (clarinet); Hawkins.

"Weddin' Blues," composed by Erskine Hawkins and Bill Johnson, arranged by Bill Johnson. Solos: Parrish; Range; Bascomb; Dash; Hawkins.

10-2-39. **"Satan Does the Rhumba,"** composed by Sammy Lowe and Erskine Hawkins, arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos: Hawkins; Henry (clarinet); Dash; Hawkins. Evokes Artie Shaw's "Serenade to a Savage" and "The Chant."

"More Than You Know," composed by Vincent Youmans, Billy Rose and Edward Eliscu. Arranger unknown, but probably Sammy Lowe. Vocal Dolores Brown; solo: Bascomb.

"Uptown Shuffle," composed by Bill Johnson and Erskine Hawkins, arranged by Bill Johnson. Solos: Parrish; Dash; Bascomb; Johnson; Henry (clarinet).

12-20-39. **"I Hadn't Anyone Till You,"** composed by Ray Noble, probable arranger, Sammy Lowe. Solo: Bascomb; vocal, Dolores Brown.

"Baltimore Bounce," composed by Sammy Lowe and Erskine Hawkins; arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos: Hawkins; Johnson; Hawkins.

"Fine and Mellow," composed by Billie Holiday, probable arranger, Sammy Lowe. Solos: Parrish; Dolores Brown, vocal; Bascomb.

"Saboo," composed by Sammy Lowe and Erskine Hawkins, arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos: cup-muted Hawkins; Parrish; Hawkins ; Henry (on fluid baritone sax). Note also the fine soli saxophone passage.

2-27-40. **"Dolimite,"** composed and arranged by Bill Johnson. The title refers to a neighborhood in Birmingham, Alabama, which is spelled "Dolomite." I attribute the misspelling to the carelessness of the personnel at Bluebird. This is an insinuating riff tune. Solos: Dash; Range; Hawkins (open). This arrangement was recorded by Jimmy Dorsey (spelled "Dolemite") for Decca on December 9, 1940.

"Whispering Grass," (traditional) probable arranger Sammy Lowe. An interesting melody, with lyrics that are absurd. Vocal: Mitchelle; solo: Hawkins (open).

4-26-40. **"Midnight Stroll,"** composed and arranged by Sammy Lowe. First chorus verile unison saxes; Solos: D. Bascomb; Dash; Hawkins (cup-muted).

"Gabriel Meets the Duke," composed by Hawkins; arranged by Sammy Lowe: A faux boogie concoction that has nothing to do with Ellington. Solos: Parrish; D. Bascomb; Henry (clarinet); Dash; Hawkins (cup-muted); Range (plunger) and Johnson (alternating); Parrish.

"Song of the Wanderer," composed by Neil Moret, probable arranger Bill Johnson. Solos: Johnson; Jimmy Mitchelle, vocal; note the excellent soli saxophones; Hawkins, open trumpet.

6-10-40. **"Ashes in the Tray,"** composed by Seiler-Benjamin-Marcus arranged by Sammy Lowe. Features a clever reference to"Smoke Rings," theme of the Casa Lima Orchestra in its introduction, and a marvelous baritone saxophone solo by Haywood Henry; cup-muted Hawkins. Vocal by Dolores Brown.

"Junction Blues," composed and arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos: McLemore (electric guitar); Johnson; Hawkins (cup-muted); Henry (wailing on clarinet).

"Sweet Georgia Brown," the standard blowing piece for jazz solos, features Paul Bascomb on tenor saxophone. The simple orchestral framework was provided by Sammy Lowe.

"Five O'Clock Whistle," a 1940 pop tune composed by Kim Gannon, Myrow, Irwin, probably arranged by Sammy Lowe. Solos: cup-muted Hawkins; P. Bascomb. Note the saxophones are. voiced in a Luncefordian way.

11-6-40. **"Put Yourself in My Place,"** composed by Haywood Henry and Avery Parrish; probable arranger, Avery Parrish. Taken at an insinuating, slow tempo, featuring cup-muted trumpets and trombones. Solos: cup-muted Hawkins; Henry, clarinet.

"Norfolk Ferry," composed by Erskine Hawkins, arranged by Sammy Lowe. One of the Hawkins band's best showcases for swinging jazz solos: Julian Dash, tenor saxophone; Henry clarinet; Dud Bascomb, trumpet; William McLemore, electric guitar; Bob Range, trombone; Paul Bascomb, tenor sax; Hawkins muted and then open in the finale.

"Soft Winds," composed by Charlie Christian, arranged by Sammy Lowe. (See text of article.)

"Nona," composed and arranged by Sammy Lowe. Tenor saxophonist Paul Bascomb's *real* showpiece. First chorus electric guitar solo by William McLemore. (See text of article.)

11-20-40. **"Riff Time,"** composed and arranged by Avery Parrish. Another chart that reflects the Lunceford influence. Solos: Haywood Henry with an especially fluent clarinet solo; and Erskine Hawkins soaring throughout the final chorus.

"I Know a Secret," which appears to have been co-composed by Paul Bascomb and ?? Seiler, arranged by Sammy Lowe. The first chorus is much in the mode of Hal Kemp's music, featuring clarinets and muted brass. Solos: Vocal by Jimmy Mitchelle; a tenor saxophone dialog between Paul Bascomb and Julian Dash; high-register Hawkins toward the end.

"S'Posin'," composed by Andy Razaf and Paul Denniker, probable arranger Sammy Lowe. Another arrangement showing the Lunceford influence, with a vocal by Dolores Brown; Hawkins leading the brass after the vocal; and a too brief trumpet dialog at the end by Hawkins and Dud Bascomb.

"Tonight You Belong to Me," composed by Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh, arranged by Sammy Lowe is notable only for the remarkable saxophone soli after the first Jimmy Mit-

chelle vocal. Note: This sounds remarkably like Jimmy McHugh's "I Can't Believe That You're in Love With Me."

1-21-41. **"No Use Squawkin',"** composed by Sammy Lowe and Erskine Hawkins, arranged by Sammy Lowe. Lunceford-like first chorus; solos by: Julian Dash; Bob Range on trombone (his longest solo on record, a salute style-wise to trombone great Dickie Wells; Dud Bascomb on plunger-muted trumpet; a fluid saxophone section passage; brash brass into the finale.

5-15-41. *On this date, vocalist **Ida James** returns to the Hawkins band.*

"Uncle Bud," composed and arranged by Bill Johnson. Solos: Dud Bascomb, against riffing Saxes and trombones; Julian Dash; Bob Range; Haywood Henry on clarinet; Erskine Hawkins with a cup-mute, and then leading the brass in the final chorus.

"Blackout," composed by Sammy Lowe and Avery Parrish, arranged by Sammy Lowe. Was designed as a sequel to "After Hours," and contains good Parrish piano with the band being more integrated into the performance than on "After Hours." Hawkins also has a cup-muted solo.

"Blue Sea," composed by Avery Parrish with the arrangement being written by Bill Johnson. This is a strongly riffing arrangement featuring: cup-muted Hawkins on the release in the first chorus; open trumpet by Dud Bascomb; Bill Johnson on alto sax; open Hawkins trumpet; flowing soli saxophones; Paul Bascomb on tenor sax; Haywood Henry on clarinet; open Hawkins trumpet at the end.

"I Love You Truly," composed by Carrie Jacob Bonds in 1912, probably arranged by
. Sammy Lowe. Avery Parrish's opening piano solo is the best tradition of hotel bands. An oddity among Hawkins recordings in that it contains a vocal group, with Ida James singing lead. This contains a cup-muted solo by Hawkins.

"Shipyard Ramble," composed by Sammy Lowe and Erskine Hawkins, arrangement by Sammy Lowe. Another excellent vehicle for swinging jazz solos: Haywood Henry on baritone sax; Hawkins on open trumpet; a glittering soli saxophone sequence; Bascomb with a plunger; Julian dash on tenor sax; and James McLemore on electric guitar.

5-27-41. *A three tune session—all vocals, two by Ida James and one by Jimmy Mitchelle. Ms. James had a sometimes alarmingly wide vibrato* ("Night After Night"), *and sometimes was not on pitch, but she was still a favorite of Savoy dancers.*

8-8-41. **"Hey Doc!,"** composed by Edgar Sampson and Kim Gannon, arranged by Sammy Lowe. An excellent arrangement with first intimations of the more complex harmonies that came Into big band arrangements throughout the 1940s. The Hawkins ensemble was very strong and unified. Haywood Henry's exemplary baritone sax provides a solid foundation for the saxophone section as well as some colorful counterlines. Solos: Paul Bascomb; Bob Range on open trombone; cup-muted Hawkins.

12-22-41. *By this time, it appears that the Hawkins band had finally been overtaken, at least insofar as its recordings are concerned, by the ubiquitous song-pluggers. The majority of their recordings from mid to late 1941 up to the 1942 recording band would be of current pop tunes, but a few worthwhile originals did get recorded.*

Although **"Someone's Rockin' My Dreamboat"** was a pop tune from late 1941, and the recording of it by the Hawkins band, with a Sammy Lowe is certainly professionally done, the marvelous tenor sax solo by Paul Bascomb is by far the highlight of the performance. Jimmy Mitchelle sings, Hawkins plays a Harmon-muted obbligato, and Dud Bascomb chimes in with some open trumpet.

5-27-42. **"Don't Cry Baby,"** composed by Sammy Lowe and Jimmy Mitchelle, and arranged by Sammy Lowe, was a sentimental ballad that become quite successful for the Hawkins band during World War II. It includes a vocal by Mitchelle, and Hawkins using his Harmon mute in wa-wa fashion. This recording provides more proof that the Hawkins band of 1942 was definitely trying to broaden its musical approach to include more of this kind of material.

"Bicycle Bounce," composed and arranged by Sammy Lowe, provides proof that the Hawkins band had retained its ability to swing, no matter what other commercial forces may have also have been in play at that time. Note the two-beat approach here. Solos: Dud Bascomb, open trumpet; Julian Dash, tenor sax; Hawkins, open trumpet; and Haywood Henry, clarinet.

"Lucky Seven" (Bill's Tune), composed and arranged by Bill Johnson, is another strong swinger, and wonderful showcase for a string of jazz solos: Bill Johnson, alto sax; Avery Parrish, piano; Dud Bascomb, plunger-muted trumpet; Bob Range, plunger-muted trombone; Paul Bascomb , tenor saxophone, and Hawkins soaring over the band at the end.

"Country Boys," composed by Paul Bascomb and Bill Johnson, and arranged by Bill Johnson, Contains harmonies that point into the 1940s. Solos: Hawkins, open trumpet; Henry, clarinet; Dud Bascomb, open trumpet; Julian Dash, tenor.

"Bear Mash Blues," composed and arranged by Sammy Lowe, features solos by: Bill Johnson, alto sax (his last recorded solo with Hawkins); Hawkins open trumpet; Dud Bascomb, plunger muted trumpet; Bob range, plunger muted trombone; Johnson again on alto sax.

Appendix 2

Notable Engagements of Erskine Hawkins and His Orchestra 1938-1942.

Erskine Hawkins driving the band bus, 1938.

December 25, 1938, closing December 29, 1938	Howard Theater, Washington, D.C.
March 30, 1939, closing April 5, 1939	Loew's State Theater, New York City
June 14, 1939	Tomlinson Hall, Indianapolis, Indiana
September 23, 1940	Graystone Ballroom, Detroit, Michigan
October 10, 1940	Apollo Theater, New York City
December 13, 1940	Apollo Theater, New York City
July 30, 1941, closing August 12, 1941	Paramount Theater, New York City
October 26, 1941	Sunset Terrace, Indianapolis, Indiana
October 31, 1941, closing November 5, 1941	Adams Theater, Newark, New Jersey
November 7, 1941, closing November 13, 1941	Stanley Theater, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
November 14, 1941, closing November 16, 1941	State Theater, Hartford, Connecticut
November 19, 1941	Barvadon Opera House, Poughkeepsie, NY
November 21, 1941, closing November 27, 1941	Earle Theater, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

December 5, 1941, closing December 11, 1941	Michigan Theater, Detroit, Michigan
December 12, 1941, closing December 14, 1941	Paramount Theater, Toldeo, Ohio
December 26, 1941, closing January 1, 1942	Chicago Theater, Chicago, Illinois
January 9, 1942, closing January 15, 1942	Orpheum Theater, Minneapolis, Minnesota
January 16, 1942, closing January 19, 1942	Orpheum Theater, St. Paul, Minnesota
January 20, 1942, closing January 22, 1942	Paramount Theater, Des Moines, Iowa
January 23, 1942, closing January 29, 1942	Orpheum Theater, Omaha, Nebraska
January 30, 1942, closing February 5, 1942	Neuman Theater, Kansas City, Missouri
April 27, 1942, closing April 29, 1942	Plymouth Theater, Worcester, Massachusetts
April 30, 1942, closing May 6, 1942	(Name unknown-major theater) Boston, MA
May 7, 1942 closing May 8, 1942	Palace Theater, Waterbury, Connecticut
November 13, 1942, closing November 19, 1942	Paradise Theater, Detroit, Michigan

Erskine Hawkins and His Orchestra continued touring extensively throughout the years of World War II, and in the post war years also.

This information was obtained from Setlist.com/Erskine Hawkins