

BLUES &
Rhythm

The Gospel Truth

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B.B. KING RARITIES

MONTE EASTER STORY

REVEREND GARY DAVIS

BYRON ARNOLD FIELD RECORDINGS



'I'm Hunched'



Rosetta Andrews, Earl Sims, Mary DePina, Monte Easter and Charles Blackwell, circa early 1950s. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

The Monte Easter Story

by Opal Louis Nations

For some extraordinary reason, one that eludes me, Monte Easter's name and contribution to rhythm and blues have, up until now, been excluded from the pantheon of sepia pioneers. Apart from the initial Sterling sides, Easter waxed for Aladdin and Imperial with Jesse Mae Robinson and guitar wizard Jimmy Nolan fronting his band. Unless I am mistaken, I have seen only a bootlegged song or two from his overall work, including his later release cut for Hunter Hancock's Swingin' label in 1960. Easter, a happy, jovial gentleman of wit and character, certainly did not deserve to be overlooked. Friends of Easter's say he was an outspoken man, one given to telling what he thought of you. This might have helped in making enemies of those who could have furthered his career. He did not like travelling that much and never wanted to fly to engagements.



Monte, the young lad (left). As a youth (above).
Courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

Easter shared the same undeserved fate as Wade Flemons - both resided in Battle Creek, Michigan, both suffered the same neglect. Isadore Leonidas 'Monte' Easter was born December 15th, 1913 in Coffeyville, Kansas, 173 miles south of Kansas City on the Oklahoma border. Luke Easter, the ball player, is a relative. His mother, Clara, was a 'high yellow' black and his father, William, a Native American. His first musical aspirations were realised on the family piano, but it was the sound coming from horn players like Louis Armstrong, Clark Terry, and Buck Clayton that most impressed and inspired him. Easter switched to trumpet and studied under Bill Trumbauer at the University of Missouri in Kansas City. His parents, both school teachers, supplied encouragement. In 1930, after a short stay in Phoenix, Easter, his parents and sister Rylva (now deceased) moved to Los Angeles where Easter studied trumpet under Jimmy Stamps at the Los Angeles Conservatory of Music.

He undertook advanced tutelage with German born Dr. Heinier and Lloyd Reece. Easter eased his way into playing for the public by sitting in on weekends at the majestic Elks Auditorium with the George Brown Band. He worked with Lester Young's family group and got to know Lester's daughter, pianist Martha Potts, pretty well. Easter then became part of the transplanted Kansas City territory band scene at Curtis Mosby's Club Alabam in 1934-35, sitting in with Harlan Leonard's Kansas City Rockets and with Fess White's outfit. During this time he played with the Ewing Brothers, Bob Parish, Noble Sissle, Roy Clark, Leonard Reed, and with Floyd Ray's band, who waxed for Roy Milton's Miltone label in 1945. Easter played taxi dances with the Ewing Brothers in the mid 1930s. After playing off and on in other bands, Easter pulled his first band together around 1943.

WORKING WITH T-BONE

Under singer Bardu Ali's (formerly with Chick Webb) leadership, the outfit played as the house-band at The Lincoln Theatre. The unit featured Chuck Thomas on tenor sax who was later replaced by Henry Tucker. Alto player Eric

Dolphy, bassist Addison Farmer, and Cleveland-born pianist, arranger, producer Ernie Freeman all played in Easter's band at one time or another. Blues singer Gloria Shannon, who in 1955 recorded with the Coo Coo Hutchinson Orchestra, also served in Easter's band. He befriended fellow Kansas City piano giant, Jay McShann, with whom he later played at

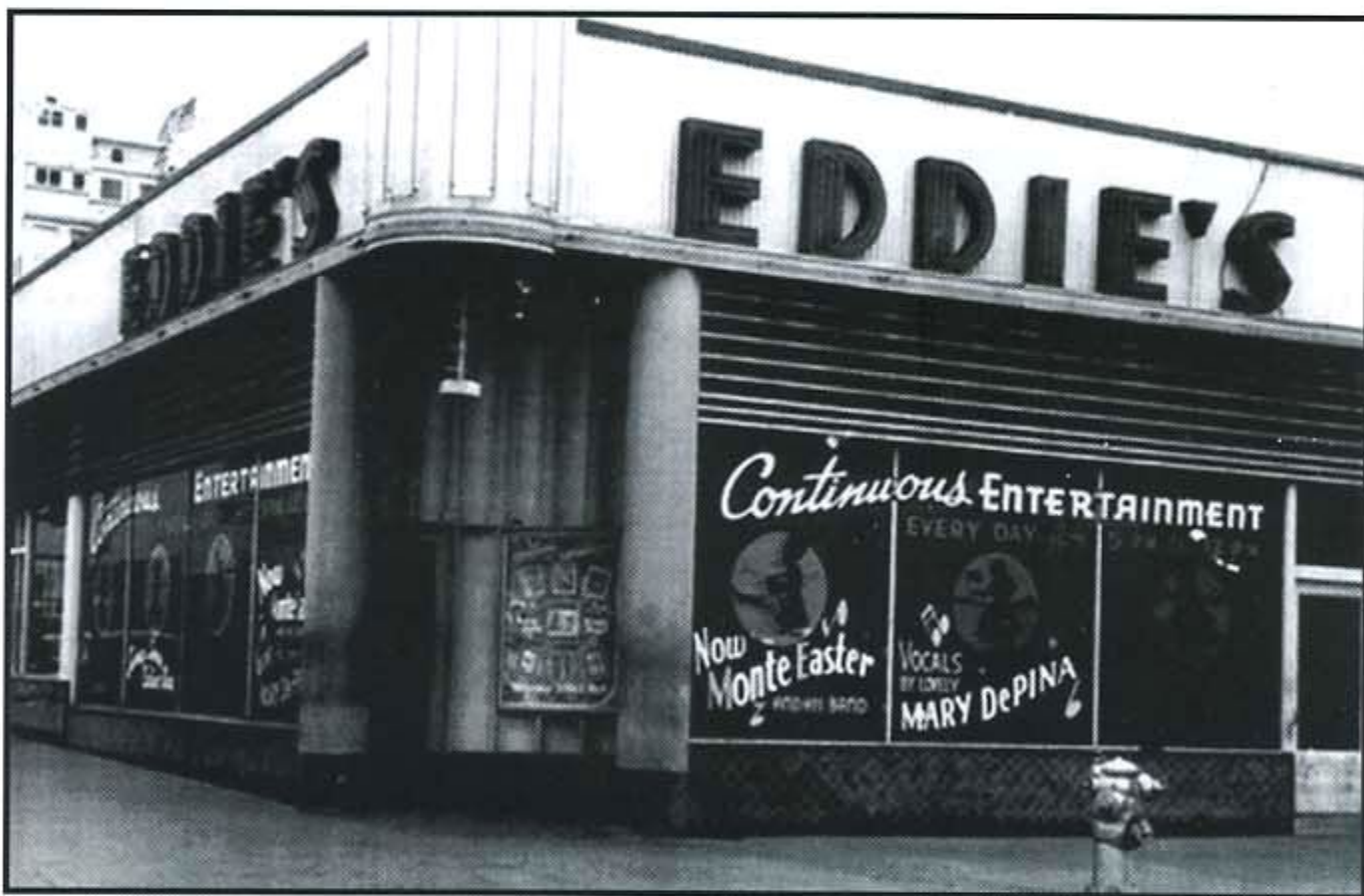
Café Society in San Francisco and back in Kansas City during the early 1960s. He became mentor, friend and godfather to Charles Brown and Ernie Freeman, both of whom he has much admired over the years. Remembering his own experiences on the instrument, Easter often took to talented pianists, gave help and advice and generally brought them along. When the Brown Sisters, proprietors of the Little Harlem Club in



Label spots courtesy of Victor Pearlín

Blackwell's brother, Charlie Blackwell, filled in on drums. Both 'Bumps' and Charlie were based in Seattle at that point and were friends of Quincy Jones who helped them along.

Easter's band was selected as guest orchestra on the 'Joe Adams - Mayor of Melody' radio show over KOWL. Adams was the first black Los Angeles deejay to play blues and rhythm records and feature live acts with any regularity. He later became Ray Charles' manager.



Eddie's Café, Los Angeles. Monte Easter had a residency here in 1948. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations

Watts (1812 Parmalee Avenue) brought T-Bone Walker to play at their place, Walker worked with Easter's Harlem Swingsters for awhile, a partnership which worked out very well. Easter and Walker later shared the same booking agent, Hal Oxley. The Brown Sisters made a special point of presenting talented women at their club. Regular female acts at this time included blues singer Pearl Trayler, who later hit with 'Three Ball Sam, The Pawn Broker Man' on Okeh Records, a rubber-legged dancer by the name of Laura Steele, and singer/comedienne/mistress of ceremonies Lorena Flippen.

In 1945, Easter formed a band around Jewish singer Judy Canova, with whom he had a brief relationship (this is not the hillbilly comedienne of that name who starred in scatterbrained movies). Another member was Earl Sims, who proprietored a radio repair business. "I took my radio to him to have it repaired. When I heard he could play alto sax, I brought him into the band," says Easter. Hubert Allen played tenor sax, Martha Potts, Lester Young's daughter, sat in on piano, on bass was Addison Farmer (whom Easter thought of as one of the world's finest bass players), and veteran A & R man 'Bumps'

STERLING RECORDS

As well as gigs at The Little Harlem, Manchester, Crane's Celebrity and California Clubs, the band managed to get house-band tenure at Club Royal down in San Diego, a gig that was to last two years. After a successful tour of Texas they were noticed by Art Rupe. Rupe, at this time, was recording director for Juke Box Records on West Seventh Street. Juke Box soon became an affiliate of A.E. Middleman's Sterling Records on West Forty-sixth Street in New York. In early 1946, Sterling issued the first of four Easter Orchestra releases that were to stretch over a period of twelve months. Easter's first release was 'Ain't Cha Glad' / 'Empty Bed Blues'. 'Ain't Cha Glad' was Easter's fondest and best remembered recording and never fails to bring smiles to his face. The song opens with a reveille trumpet measure and bounces into a nursery-rhyme type lyric centreing on the musical prowess of various members in the band. 'Empty Bed Blues' is a knockdown, drag out slow blues moaned by Easter, supported by Earl Sims' strong tenor work.

Three follow-up releases emerged close on the heels of 'Ain't Cha Glad' which made waves and produced coin for the juke boxes. Easter asserted that he wrote all his tunes. The fourth and last

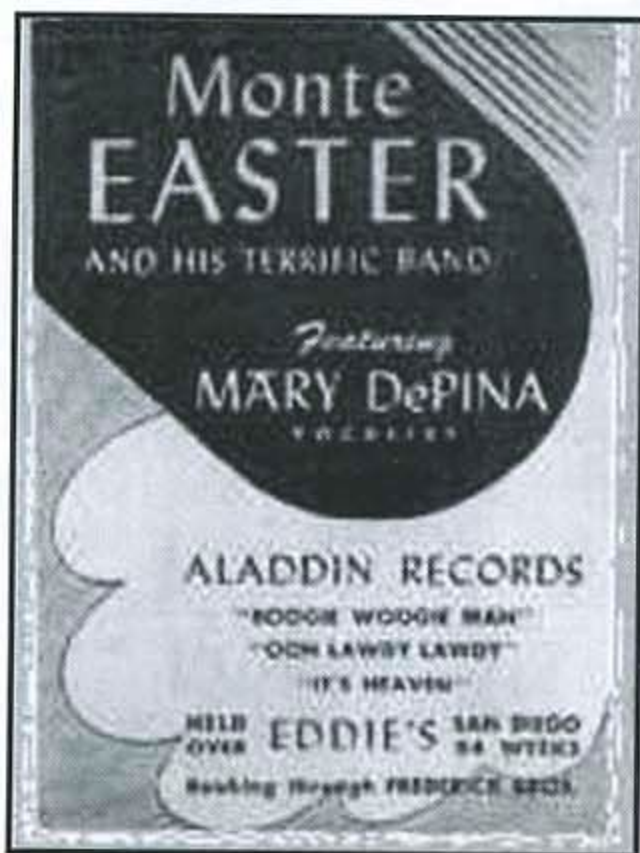


Courtesy of Ms. Rutbie Elliot.



Left to right: Alice Young, Jimmy Delaney, Monte Easter and Gabriel Williams, circa late 1940s/early 1950s. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations

Sterling release, 'Evening Blues' backed with 'I Need A Girl Like You,' was reviewed in a fall 1945 issue of *Billboard*: "Leading a lively jam band with his trumpet, it's the husky race singing of Monte Easter that counts most in this cutting, particularly for the slow race blues of a flighty chick who leaves him on the 'Evening Blues.' At



Courtesy Ms. Rutbie Elliot

a brighter beat, and with the band boys singing in unison, its delightful Harlesemese ditty for 'I Need A Girl Like You'. Judy Canova's one outing with Easter on Sterling remains unheard by this writer. Easter and the band always got high for the sessions, but they stayed clear of booze and hard drugs.

In June 1946, Maxwell Davis had Easter back the lovely Mary De Pina for one Aladdin session. The net result was four songs that placed Easter in the *Billboard* Encyclopedia of hit recordings. Easter's musical interpretations of 'Boogie Woogie Man', 'I Love My Man', 'Ooh Lawdy Mama' and 'It's Heaven' with Maxwell Davis on tenor sax, Rosetta Andrews (who Easter picked up at Café Society and would work with at Eddie's Café) played piano. Ralph Hamilton played bass and Charlie Blackwell, who sat in on drums, really put the Monte Easter name out there and helped a lot to keep the band working. Singer Mary De Pina, sadly died of cancer, her career cut short. Easter's tenure at Club Royal ended in 1947. He was replaced by Walter Fuller. In 1948, Easter played as house band at Eddie's

Café, a residence that was to last for a year.

Somewhere around this period, Easter got himself involved with Bertram Jackson and The Hollywood Goldsound Orchestra. The Goldsound Orchestra was a seventeen-piece swing-band in the Stan Kenton mold and boasted some of the finest musicians in local music circles. Easter was assigned musical direction while the Goldsound Production Company, run by Jackson and Bill Singleton, talent-searched for undiscovered singers, dancers and other acts worthy of TV exposure. The idea was similar to that of the Arthur Godfrey organisation. An October 1950 issue of *Billboard* mentions Easter as heading up a five-piece combo at weekends at Crane's Celebrity Club. His performance is described as "a trumpeter who blows like mad." For a brief period Easter worked for the Post Office in Kansas City, but he missed the entertainment business and returned to L.A. After the success of the songs Easter had written and helped arrange for Mary De Pina on Aladdin Records, he began trying to hawk his own charts to other artists. The most notable was 'Ain't Nothing Shaking', a song that ended up on the flipside of Amos Milburn's heavy-selling 'Just One More Drink' (Aladdin 3093) in 1950. Fans were more interested in Milburn's follow-up record to 'Bad Bad Whiskey' than they were in Easter's raunchy jump vehicle.



Jimmy Nolen, Rosetta Davis, Monte Easter, Eddie Davis, Ralph Hamilton and Oscar Lee Bradley, circa early 1950's. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

IMPERIAL RECORDS

Easter asserts that he sold the song to Maxwell Davis for \$300. 1951 proved to be the peak year for Easter. Having signed with Lew Chudd's Imperial Records on Hollywood Boulevard, his records would certainly reach a much wider audience. Chudd issued four Ernie Freeman-arranged records on Easter over the course of seven months. None has seen reissue. His best remembered song from these two Imperial sessions is 'I'm Hunched', based on an expression Easter had heard as a kid, meaning "I'm hip to that jive." His band (The Harlem Swingsters) at this juncture was composed of himself, trumpet, Earl Sims, alto sax, Hubert Allen, alto sax, Clara Lewes, piano, Bernard Carriere, bass, and Sonny Heard, drums. Imperial's Lew Chudd or possibly Henri Rene probably had first noticed Easter at The Little Harlem Club where he enjoyed residency alongside the soft-singing tenor Senis Moultry. Easter moved up to swank dance venues and played at the gala opening of the Uptown Ballroom (formerly The Savoy) at the corner of Fifty-fifth and South Central Avenue with torch singer Dorothy Gavin sharing the bill. Gavin was an old friend of Easter's and both had played in the Floyd Ray and Leonard Reed Orchestras. Before the Uptown date, The Monte Easter Orchestra had toured with ex-Jimmy Lunceford vocalist Dan Grissom who was enjoying a measure of success with his waxing of 'King Of Fools' on Imperial and Linda Hopkins who, having dropped Savoy for King Records, was riding high with 'Doggin' The Blues' and 'How Can I Go On'. The aggregation played the terrace of the fashionable Woodlake Country Club where they performed for the well heeled.

Every Christmas season at the Lincoln Theatre, the Los Angeles Sentinel (an African-American newspaper) organised a four-hour Christmas basket event for the needy. A vast array of major stars usually donated their time to the event organised by disc jockeys Hunter Hancock and Joe Adams in league with John Thomas Gibson, editorial critic for the theatrical segment of the Saturday Sentinel. In June, Gibson passed away, and a whole legion of show biz luminaries pledged their services for the Christmas basket give away and memorial program. Admission was 75 cents worth of groceries. Easter played on the benefit alongside such notables as Red Foxx, Jimmie Forrest, Gerry Mulligan and Benny Carter.

In 1952, Easter signed with Jack Bergman's freshly acquired Discovery label. Discovery, originally a Hollywood label, had just been sold by Albert Marx to its new Big Apple owners. The band at this time was composed of Pat Reed, vocals, Monte Easter, trumpet, Rosetta Andrews, piano, Ralph Hamilton, bass, and Charles Blackwell, drums. Maxwell Davis's tenor was added to broaden the combo's sound on the one date shared with Discovery vocalist Jesse Mae Robinson for the Los Angeles session. Robinson cut one of her finest waxings, *Jessie Mae's Blues*, during this date.

At the time, the band was working at The Brass

Rail on Vernon Street where they shared billing with Pee Wee Crayton and La Wanda Page. On weekends the combo worked The Casablanca Club where they came up with the song 'Casablanca Boogie.'

'Casablanca Boogie,' Easter's initial Discovery release, was recorded in Los Angeles with Pat Reed's vocal over-dubs for the flip, 'Pastel,' done in New York. On the second and last Discovery release, Easter recalled that the band backed the aforementioned singer Jesse Mae Robinson, an artist who played the Playboy circuit in Kansas (not related in any way to the singer, pianist, and composer of the same name). This bears out Jim Dawson's likewise assumption in his excellent article on the other Texas-born Robinson in Juke Blues, issue #22, Winter/Spring 1991. Down Beat Magazine gave 'Pastel' two stars; 'Casablanca Boogie' was awarded a miserly one star.

Down Beat's review reads: "The Red Callendar-penned 'Pastel' is best known through the Erroll Garner recording. Reed shows promise as a junior league Billie Holiday, but her voice is poorly balanced with the band. The coupling is a nondescript r & b shuffle blues." An October 1952 Billboard review treated the later Robinson disc in the same fashion, awarding only two miserly stars to 'Jesse Mae's Blues' and one for 'That's His Secret.' Contrary to Dave Penny's liner notes to 'Scratchin', (Charly (G.B.) CD 268) centreing around guitarists Pete Lewis, Jimmy Nolan, and Cal Green, Jimmy Nolan did not first record with J.D. Nicholson in 1952 in Tulsa. Monte asserted that he brought the unrecorded Nolan out to California from his home in Tulsa in 1953. Nolan became a fixture in Easter's band alongside Easter, trumpet, Clarence Lively, sweet-singing J.D. Weir (aka Jimmy Delaney) tenor sax, Frank Dandridge, bass, Alice Young, piano and Gabriel Williams, drums.

ALADDIN RECORDS

In July 1953, the Monte Easter Band played at Gillis Place on West Buckeye Road. Jimmy Wilson, who was garnering success at the time with 'Tin Pan Alley' on Bob Geddin's Big Town label, took top billing. By October, the Monte Easter Band was back recording for Eddie and Leo Mesner's Aladdin Records in Beverly Hills. The outfit's first release, 'After Dark' backed with 'Just A Rockin', was issued in January 1954. February 1954's Billboard described 'After Dark' (a song with Easter's vocals) with brevity by stating, "That is the time of night Easter says he has a ball, and from the sounds projected by Easter and the boys here, it is easy to believe."

The reverse also got a favorable mention: 'Just A Rockin' is a good instrumental with a solid beat that builds up to a hectic climax. Danceable as this material is, it should make a good juke box item.' A second and last release, 'New Orleans Hop' coupled with 'Blues In The Evening', with vocals by Jimmy Nolan, was released in September 1954. The disc is described in the trades as follows: "New Orleans Hop,' a new tune for dancers, is predicted another hit for band master, Monte Easter. On the flip side, vocalist Jimmy

Nolan does a jam-up job with 'Blues In The Evening'. Easter and his all-star musical group have been standing on the big name threshold for the past two years and are expected to make the grade with this new waxing."

Easter's tenure with Aladdin was short, however. By the end of



Jimmy Delaney and Monte Easter circa mid 1950s. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations



Publicity photo for Monte Easter circa 1950s. Courtesy Opal Louis Nations.

1954, he had signed a deal with John R. Fullbright at Elko Records on East Adams Boulevard. It was on Elko that Nolan made his first two significant recordings. The initial release was as a member of Easter's band; the second was cut under his own name. 'Midnight Rider', backed with 'Going Back To Kansas City', was released in early 1955. 'Slow Freight Back Home', sliced with 'Let's Try Again', surfaced later that year. 'Let's Try Again' is Nolan's upbeat vocal

bass and clarinet players' names have escaped his memory. The original 'Swingin' version of 'Weekend Blues' wails like crazy, with Roberts and Nolan blasting righteously on sax and guitar while a rippling piano and solidly thrashed drums add colour. The underside, 'Birdland Hop,' is a frantic Big Jay McNeely dance vehicle that finds Jessie Price coming in at times to call out the dance steps. The 'Swingin' single

was reissued shortly after on the Debonair label with an alternate version of 'Weekend Blues.' This second version drags on the beat a little more and finds Price playing at stop time in a few places. The overall effect is jazzier and slightly less down in the alley, although it is difficult to tell at times. Both versions are sensational and should be sought out by collectors.

Easter again set down his horn. When asked why he quit playing music, Easter said that being constantly plied with drinks from patrons at The Brass Rail was the deciding factor.

BACK TO KANSAS CITY

Easter set out for Kansas City but returned to Los Angeles in 1975. In the late 1980s he took up singing seriously and formed 'Kansas City Jazz,' a band made up of some of his old buddies. These included Eddie Davis on tenor sax, Caughy Roberts, alto sax, Wallace Brodis, tenor sax, Duke Burell, piano, Billy Hadnot, bass, Jim Daniels, guitar, Oscar Bradley on drums and himself on trumpet. After founding his own label, Intrigue, Easter recorded a single, an album and then finally a CD of twelve of his own compositions.

The CD collection included the heavy-rocking 'I Was Mad' and 'Do The Hoosie Doosie,' easy listening cocktail swing versions of 'Sound Of Kansas City,' the guitar-stinging 'Disco In Frisco,' a blast from the past entitled 'Jump Boys Jump,' a holdout from the old Imperial Records days, the smoldering slow-blues readings of 'Way Past Midnight,' 'Sherm Alley,' 'Sweet Lovin' Woman,' and 'My Luck Is Bound To Change' with Easter's husky pipes calling out the verses. Last but not least the reissue of 'Weekend Blues' from 1960. All in all a winning set of show-me-state showstoppers.

The Easter Band played a lengthy engagement at The Caliente Lodge in Palm Springs in 1995. Kansas City Jazz then enjoyed concerts at The Chester Washington Clubhouse on Western Avenue, The Holiday Inn at Crowne Plaza, Levy's Restaurant in Beverly Hills, The Shriners Temple #5,

The Musicians Clef Club (where Easter served as president) plus a multitude of others. Monte Easter married six times, the last to Ruthie Elliot.

Monte died of congestive heart failure on Christmas Day, 2000. He clung to life with a passion. Towards the end, he fell down and could not get up. It was evening, and Monte insisted he was fine. He fell asleep on the floor, and Ruthie, not being able to move him, left him to go to bed. In the morning she found him sleeping in bed by her side, a testament to Monte's rugged determination and will to survive.

With thanks to Ruthie Elliot and Norman Bowden.



Label shots courtesy of Victor Pearlman

reworking of The Squires' Combo waxing of 'Let's Give Love A Try,' cut in 1953 but without the chanting harmony background. Nolan gives the chart plenty of swing with both booting sax and Nolan's strong T-Bone Walker-like licks brightening up the overall effects.

After the Elko sessions, Easter retired from music and got a job at the Post Office. In 1960, Easter cut one record for Hunter Hancock and Roger Davenport's 'Swingin' label out of Hollywood. Easter remembered some of the musicians on the session: himself on trumpet, Count Basie's ex-alto player Caughy Roberts, Jesse Price sang and played drums, Jimmy Nolan played guitar, Alice Young took up the piano stool, and a cat remembered as Allan played tenor. The