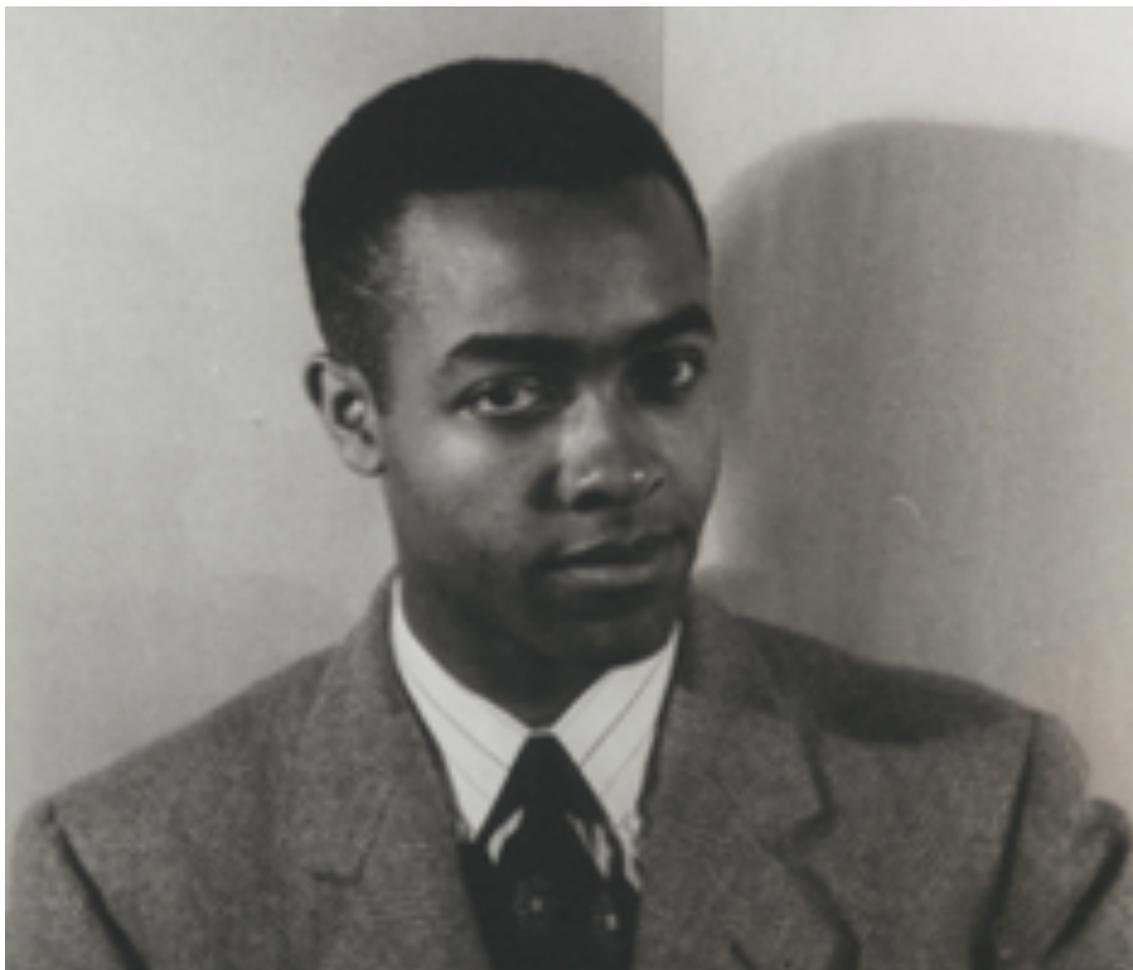


# In Search of Jimmy "Lover Man" Davis

François Grosjean



**Jimmy Davis in 1942**

Courtesy of the Van Vechten Trust,  
Beinecke Library, Yale.

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**The excerpts from the Langston Hughes / Jimmy Davis correspondence are used with permission of International Literary Properties and the Langston Hughes Estate.**

Jimmy Davis was best known for his song, "Lover Man", which Billie Holiday made famous. He passed away some twenty-five years ago, and slowly became an evanescent memory in the minds of many. When I went in search of him, I discovered a talented songwriter, composer, pianist, singer and actor. I also uncovered an exceptional human being. His was a life of good times and hard times, a life in a first culture where segregation was still rampant, followed by a life as an expatriate in a second culture that welcomed him. It was a life of music, of songs in three languages, and of wonderful, loving, friendships. It was a life that needed to be told before it is too late.

To Jacqueline Baraduc, and to all those who helped me prepare this book.

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## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

One day, when I was a student at the Sorbonne in Paris, in the 1960's, I went to my father's home for dinner. When I arrived, I saw that there was a guest there. My father introduced him to me, "This is Jimmy Davis. He's a musician and you owe him a lot." I smiled at this man, who must have been in his 50s, and said hello. Then I asked my father, "How so?" He told me that Jimmy had been friends with him and my mother when they were still together, just after the second world war, and that Jimmy had encouraged my mother to have me, or something to that effect. It was rather vague. I don't remember much more about our dinner with Jimmy Davis and as the years went by, I almost forgot about him. From time to time, I would tell family members or close friends that an American musician had played an important role in my early life, but I was no longer sure how – not that I ever really knew. Little by little my memory of that evening faded away.

Time went by, I got married, became a parent and moved to the United States before coming back to Europe and Switzerland. At the age of 64, 45 years after that dinner at my father's, I inherited some family documents from my British mother from whom I had been estranged since my adolescence. Among them was a short autobiography of her early life in England and then in France where she had joined my father in 1945. They had met in England two years earlier (my father had been a Free French fighter pilot) and had lived together for only four years before separating.

As I was reading about her pregnancy, I came across a few sentences that startled me, and that I had to read twice. My mother had written, "One day (my husband) brought home to dinner an American soldier, Jimmy Davis, a musician. He had just finished writing a song called "Lover Man" which became a big success. He persuaded me that it was wrong to abort. With his help, I decided to keep the baby." For a few minutes everything around me stood still and I immediately thought back to that dinner and the musician I had met so briefly. So that was how he had "encouraged my mother to have me". Basically, he had saved my life by convincing my mother to keep the baby she was expecting. I owed my life to someone I knew nothing about and whom I could hardly remember.

As my father had been dead for some 30 years, I phoned my elderly stepmother, my father's second wife, to tell her what I had found out and to ask her if she had known Jimmy Davis. She had, she said, although she hadn't known about this particular event, but she couldn't tell me much more apart from the fact that she remembered him as a very kind gentleman.

So I started a search for him. I wanted to see his face, hear his voice, and find out what kind of person he had been. I looked him up on the web, and quickly saw that his hit song, "Lover Man (Oh, Where Can You Be)" had been – and still is – a major success. It had been recorded not only by Billie Holiday in 1944, but also by a score

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<sup>1</sup> The first part of this introduction is based in part on an article I wrote for *The Guardian* on December 6, 2014, "The American jazz musician who saved my life".

of other artists since then: Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Whitney Houston, Norah Jones, Jimmy Somerville, Barbra Streisand, and many others. A French academic, Michel Fabre, who specialized in African Americans in Paris in the last century talked about Jimmy Davis briefly in his writings<sup>2</sup>. Eventually I found two photos of Jimmy: one of him as a very young man and another in army uniform with Billie Holiday a few years later. I was struck by his eyes – beautiful dark eyes that reflected intelligence and kindness. As for listening to his voice, I had to wait a bit until recordings of him singing were reissued on the web. The ones that marked me are part of a record digitized by the French National Library and entitled Jimmy “Loverman” Davis<sup>3</sup>. There I discovered his voice, melodious, warm and teasing at times, in the three languages he sang in: English, his first language, French, the language of the country he lived in most of his life, and Spanish.

One particular song – he composed many during his career – is called "C'est Beau" (It's Beautiful)<sup>4</sup> and in it he lists some of the little things in life that he finds wonderful. One verse has struck a chord with me: “A baby who sleeps quietly in his cradle ... it's so beautiful; his upturned nose, his small hands ... that's so lovely.” When I heard those words, I couldn't help asking myself whether he had visited my parents before they separated and had seen me asleep in my cradle. As it happens, I do have an upturned nose ... and it was even more striking when I was a baby.

This said, I still didn't know where or when he was born, when he had settled down in France, what his contribution had been to the world of songs and music, or when he had died and where he was buried. My long term aim became to find out more about Jimmy Davis, his life and career. I contacted a few jazz specialists who knew him by name, and I even found a few people who had attended his burial service at the American Church in Paris at the end of the last century, but none of them could tell me anything about his life and his career. I was disappointed that I could not find any more information after several months of research and so, during a short stay in Paris in November 2014, I went to the registry office at the City Hall in the 14th arrondissement in Paris where he had lived. I stated that I was not a family member (something that is important in France to get personal data) and then explained why I was interested in Jimmy Davis. The person behind the desk looked at me slightly longer than usual and I already imagined that he would tell me that I couldn't have the information. But then he typed a few things on his keyboard, the printer started whirring, and out came a sheet he gave me. It was Jimmy's death certificate and it contained a lot of other information I had desperately sought for many months.

James Edward Davis, who had lived at 33 bis avenue Reille, Paris 14e, had died in Paris 12e in 1997 at the age of 82. I was already in the 14th arrondissement so I went to the building he had lived in. I came to one of those imposing oak doors one

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<sup>2</sup> Fabre, Michel (1991). *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Fabre, Michel, and Williams, John Alfred (1996). *A Street Guide to African Americans in Paris*. Paris: Cercle d'Etudes Afro-Américaines, 206 pages.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7BXXhKcDZc&list=PLnG37rVyJ2MyaBqq-bvrcR63Wfpb5nGu&index=11>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49HFN4qVmdc>

finds on avenues in Paris, firmly locked, with a letter key press system to open it. Without a code, I waited around but no-one entered or left. Then I saw that right next to the building, there was an architect's office and I went in to enquire about the door. Again I explained what I was trying to do and asked if there was a concierge I could speak to. And, once again, luck was on my side. One of the people working there came out with me, typed in the code, and then knocked on the concierge's door. She came out and I again repeated my story. She remembered Jimmy Davis well and took me to his downstairs neighbor, a friend of his, Maryvonne Dufour, who was still there and who invited me in.

I couldn't believe my luck. In less than an hour, I had found out a lot about him and where he had lived, I had entered his building, and was now talking to a person who had known him well. I told my story once again and we chatted for over an hour. She told me a lot about her friend, Jimmy, and how he would often come down for dinner in his later days, showed me photos of him, and handed me the phone number of his closest friend in France. Just before leaving, she went to another room and came back with a hand painted portrait of Jimmy by the Portuguese artist, Jacinto Luis. I started admiring it but then she said with a smile, "It's for you!". I was dumbfounded and asked her why. Her answer went straight to my heart: "Jimmy gave me this portrait when he was still alive. I took great care of it as I knew that someday, I would pass it on to somebody special. You are that person and you should have it!" What an amazing gift that was!

A few days later, I met Jimmy's long time and best friend in France, Jacqueline Baraduc, an elderly lady who radiated kindness and warmth. We spoke for three hours in a small Parisian café and she told me, among other things, that she had met Jimmy for the first time in the early 1950s. They had stayed close friends during his many years in France, all the way to when he died. She described him as an exceptional person, with a natural elegance, and a friendly personality. All those who knew him simply loved him.

With all that I had learned on that one day, my quest became easier although it did extend over time as I was busy with my other writing activities. I did manage to write a longer article for the French *HuffPost* a bit later<sup>5</sup>. I also contacted several of his musical friends, both in the United States, such as Nathan Davis and Art Simmons, and in France, Jay Gottlieb, who kindly accepted to talk to me about Jimmy. Jazz specialists such as Val Wilmer<sup>6</sup>, Philippe Baudoin and Paul Kaufman interacted with me and sent me articles and song information. I also contacted Bruce Kellner and Edward Burns, of the Carl van Vechten Trust, concerning photos I might use. It is the former who directed me to Melissa Barton, curator of the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library at Yale, who helped me obtain the correspondence, over a 25-year period, between Jimmy Davis and Langston Hughes, the great African American poet and writer. It was an invaluable source of information as Jimmy was

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<sup>5</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/francois-grosjean/a-la-recherche-de-jimmy-davis-le-musicien-de-jazz-qui-ma-sauve-la-vie\\_b\\_6366896.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/francois-grosjean/a-la-recherche-de-jimmy-davis-le-musicien-de-jazz-qui-ma-sauve-la-vie_b_6366896.html) The information presented in this article is referred to extensively in the English Wikipedia entry on Jimmy Davis.

<sup>6</sup> I exchanged several letters with Val Wilmer and she also kindly corrected a few extracts of my text.

notorious for not writing much otherwise<sup>7</sup>. Jacqueline Baraduc, his long-time friend, told me that he hated to write and hence she received practically no letters from him. He enjoyed phoning though, she said. Langston Hughes teased him in a letter in 1954<sup>8</sup> that he didn't expect to get another note for months as Jimmy's last letter was exceptional for a non-writer like him! I will delve into their correspondence often in what follows, and will give direct quotes, without changing their way of writing and expressing themselves.

I was also lucky that Jimmy's US Army file had come out intact from the 1976 fire at the National Archives in St. Louis, and that it was now available to the general public. The Englewood Library (Eric Schwarz) also had documents they shared with me, and the New York Public Library (Paul Friedman) helped me obtain references to newspaper articles I possessed, as did Robyn Wasserman. To all of this, I added personal testimonies I obtained gratefully from those who had known and appreciated Jimmy Davis during his many years in France: Jacqueline Baraduc, of course, who went out of her way to send me documents, newspaper clippings, personal testimonies, and photos, as well as from Claude Bamas, Jacques Barges, Clovis Depretz (Don Clovis), Rory Edge, Jacinto Luis, Josiane Martinez-Simon, and others.

As I was reconstructing Jimmy Davis' life, I realized that he had been a great songwriter - he had composed some 130 works during his career - but also a pianist, a singer, and a talented actor. But this was not all. He had actively protested against the segregation in the US Army in the early 1940s and had actually done some prison time because of it. He nevertheless served his country for three and half years during World War II despite suffering from racial discrimination during that time. His letters to Langston Hughes which he started writing in 1942 are revealing and poignant. It is only when he discovered France in 1945, and later returned for good in 1947, that he found the environment that suited him as an African American artist.

Jimmy Davis' life story is worth telling. It is a life of good times and hard times, a life in a first culture where segregation was still rampant, followed by a life as an expatriate in a second culture that welcomed him. It is a life of music, of songs in three languages, and of wonderful, loving, friendships. I will tell his story here, paying particular attention to the first fifty years of his life as it is for this period that I have obtained the most information. Testimonies from friends who knew him and who are still alive will cover the last part of his life.

One final word, maybe, on whether I should be the one to relate Jimmy's story. Clearly, I do not share his ancestry, I am not a professional musician, and I only met him once, even though my parents were friends with him. But like him, I have lived in, and know intimately, several cultures, most notably the French and the American. Like Jimmy, I immigrated to another country as an adult - from France to the United

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<sup>7</sup> All excerpts used here have received the permission of International Literary Properties and the Langston Hughes Estate.

<sup>8</sup> Letter from Langston Hughes to Jimmy Davis, July 24, 1954. Langston Hughes papers, Beinecke Library, Yale.

States for me<sup>9</sup>, and from the United States to France for him. I live and work with both English and French, and know other languages to various degrees, just as Jimmy did. Finally, I have spent much of my career studying those who are bilingual and bicultural, just as Jimmy became when he lived in France. I sincerely hope that Jimmy would have recognized himself in what follows.

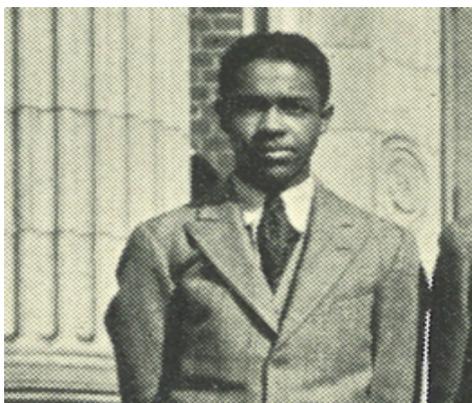
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<sup>9</sup> Grosjean, François (2019). *A Journey in Languages and Cultures: The Life of a Bicultural Bilingual*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## 1. Early years

We know very little about Jimmy Davis' early years, but with the help of a few reliable sources<sup>10</sup> as well as personal testimonies, I have been able to retrace it to some extent. James Edward Davis was born on April 15, 1915, in Madison, Georgia. His father, Emory, was of Cherokee ascendancy and his mother, Lessie, was an African American. He had two younger sisters, Inez and Hazel. Jacqueline Baraduc told me about a little incident that took place when he was a baby. His mother would take him with her in his baby basket when she was working in the fields. One day, a snake entered the basket but a nearby cat jumped on it and killed it, saving the baby. Unfortunately, the snake had bitten the cat and it died later on. In Jimmy's Army file, there is a transcript of recollections he had as a small boy. He mentions the intolerable racial segregation that existed in the South and the negative attitudes of the whites towards African Americans. He remembered seeing conductors slap colored people in trains and witnessing a pregnant African American woman being kicked because she was in the wrong place. Jimmy remained marked throughout his life by the segregation he had experienced in Georgia.

When Jimmy was six years old, the family moved to Gary, Indiana, to escape the racial persecution of the South<sup>11</sup> and they stayed there for three years. Wilmer<sup>12</sup> writes that the singer, Bessie Smith, was all the rage at the time and the family, who owned a phonograph, played her records constantly. Jimmy reported that he was



**Jimmy at 16 (1931).**  
Courtesy Dwight Morrow  
High School, Englewood.

heavily influenced by the blues, and by Bessie Smith in particular. He listened to her sing from morning to night, he said, and he "got to love this woman"<sup>13</sup>. Jimmy also told Boris Vian<sup>14</sup> that she had greatly influenced him.

When Jimmy was nine, he moved with his family to Englewood, New Jersey and lived in a small house, that is still standing, at 250 Epps Avenue. The 1930 US Census lists the following in their household: Emory, age 38, Lessie, age 34, James, age 14, Inez, age 12, and Hazel, age 10. Jimmy attended the local school and then Englewood High School (now Dwight Morrow High School). He was active in various extra curricular activities but did not

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<sup>10</sup> The main sources are: Two articles by Val Wilmer: Wilmer, Valerie (1975a). Blues for a Lady. *Melody Maker*, 50, May 3. Wilmer, Valerie (1975b). Jimmy 'Lover Man' Davis talks to Valerie Wilmer. *Swing Journal*, May 26. An article by William Keefe: Keefe, William (1954). Jimmy (Lover Man) Davis conquers Spain with songs. *European Stars and Stripes*, May 30. The writings of Michel Fabre (see earlier footnote) and of Boris Vian: Vian, Boris (1948). Jimmy Davis "Lover Man". *Jazz-Hot*, 19, January. There is also Jimmy's US Army file obtained from the National Archives in St. Louis, and two high school yearbooks obtained from the Englewood Library in New Jersey.

<sup>11</sup> Wilmer, 1975a

<sup>12</sup> Wilmer, 1975b

<sup>13</sup> Wilmer, 1975b

<sup>14</sup> Vian, 1948

enjoy sports that much. We learn from the 1931 year book (the Engle-Log) that we was a member of the Pro and Con Club, a debating society. It is here that we see him for the first time in a group photo. Two of the topics that year were, "Resolved, that Englewood High School should adopt student government", and "Resolved, that the development of the chain stores is detrimental to the best interests of the American people". Jimmy was already actively involved in music, particularly the piano.



**Jimmy at 18 (1933).**  
Courtesy Dwight Morrow  
High School, Englewood.

Jimmy graduated from Englewood High School in 1933, at age 18. In the 1933 Engle-Log year book, he chose the following phrase to head a short summary of his activities: "Let my music speak for me". The activities he lists are Orchestra, Glee Club (a choir group), Pro and Con Club, and the McKenna Extemporaneous Contest. In the "Class Knocks", he puts "Jimmy" in the category "Known as", his "Outstanding characteristics" are "clothes", he is "Crazy about" "music", and he "Will be" a "Jazz artist". As for the "Class prophecy" which weaves a narrative around a fictitious radio broadcast, we find James Davis directing the Englewood Philharmonic Symphony! There is also a photo of the members of the school's musical clubs and Jimmy is right there at the back of the photo.

Upon graduation, he worked for a while with the pianist Marguerite Upshur who prepared him for the next stage of his studies<sup>15</sup>. From 1935 to 1938, Jimmy attended the Juilliard Institute of Musical Art, something quite rare at the time for an African American. There he studied the piano and composition and a benefactress paid his tuition. His main teacher was Annabel Farrington McKellar and he also followed courses at Carnegie Hall with William Beller. Jimmy never officially graduated from Juilliard but he told a reporter in 1941 that he intended to go back to earn his diploma, which he never did because of the onset of the war.

While at Juilliard, but especially afterwards, he was involved in various musical activities. First, he taught music. A 1941 newspaper clipping entitled, "Jimmy Davis, songwriter"<sup>16</sup> states that in order to support himself, Jimmy was teaching piano and theory to 15 to 20 youngsters over in Englewood. Second, according to the *Englewood Press*<sup>17</sup>, George Scott and he gave a joint recital at the Junior High School in Englewood in 1938. Among the distinguished audience were John Charles Thomas and Deems Taylor. In addition, he participated with his quartet in the Major Bowes' Amateur Hour where he won second place<sup>18</sup>. This was a radio talent show in the 1930s and 1940s created by Edward Bowes.

<sup>15</sup> "Jimmy Davis, Songwriter", New York Amsterdam Star-News, August 9, 1941.

<sup>16</sup> "Jimmy Davis, Songwriter", New York Amsterdam Star-News, August 9, 1941

<sup>17</sup> *Englewood Press*, April 24, 1941.

<sup>18</sup> "Jimmy Davis, Songwriter", New York Amsterdam Star-News, August 9, 1941

But the activity that he enjoyed the most was composing music and writing songs which he considered his real job, as he states in his US Army file. According to a 1941 article<sup>19</sup>, Jimmy had already made up his mind that he'd be a composer when he was a kid in Madison! In 1937, Tommy Pendle, who had appeared numerous times as a singer on the radio, and Jimmy wrote and published the song "Moment With You." Jimmy said that it never had much success<sup>20</sup>. A few years later, though, he wrote his first hit, "Why Is A Good Man So Hard To Find" (copyrighted in 1940). An *Englewood Press* article<sup>21</sup> stated, "If you hear that latest tune ... just remember that the author and composer is Jimmy Davis, an Englewood ... boy who is making good in the popular music world." The article gave the lyrics of the song:

"All alone --  
 No one to love or call my own --  
 Life for me is endless misery  
 Guess it was just meant  
 To be that way, you see.  
 Cupid seems inclined  
 To be unkind  
 Why is a good man so hard to fine?"

In my dreams he comes to me  
 Oh! that dreams were reality.  
 But alas, my reveries  
 All bring to mind  
 Why is a good man so hard to find?"

According to this same article, the song was introduced by the Charioteers - a gospel and pop vocal group - in a broadcast at the time, and recordings were then made by them for Columbia and also on Decca records by the Dixielanders (vocal chorus by Midge Williams<sup>22</sup>). William Keefe who wrote about Jimmy Davis in a 1954 article<sup>23</sup> tells us that of all his compositions at that time, this was his favorite. Even though it was also recorded by Lil Hardin Armstrong<sup>24</sup>, the former wife of Louis Armstrong, it never reaped the popular acclaim accorded "Lover Man" (see the next chapter). Val Wilmer<sup>25</sup> recounts a story that Jimmy told her about Billie Holiday. He said that before her death in 1959, she was looking through her collection of songs and came across it. "Oh, I remember this," she said. "This is just as good a song as "Lover Man". I'm going to record it." Unfortunately, Billie Holiday did not live long enough to do so. In later years, Jimmy changed some of the lyrics, replaced "man" with "girl" in

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<sup>19</sup> "Jimmy Davis, Songwriter", New York Amsterdam Star-News, August 9, 1941.

<sup>20</sup> *Englewood Press*, April 24, 1941.

<sup>21</sup> *Englewood Press*, April 24, 1941.

<sup>22</sup> <https://secondhandsongs.com/performance/851495>

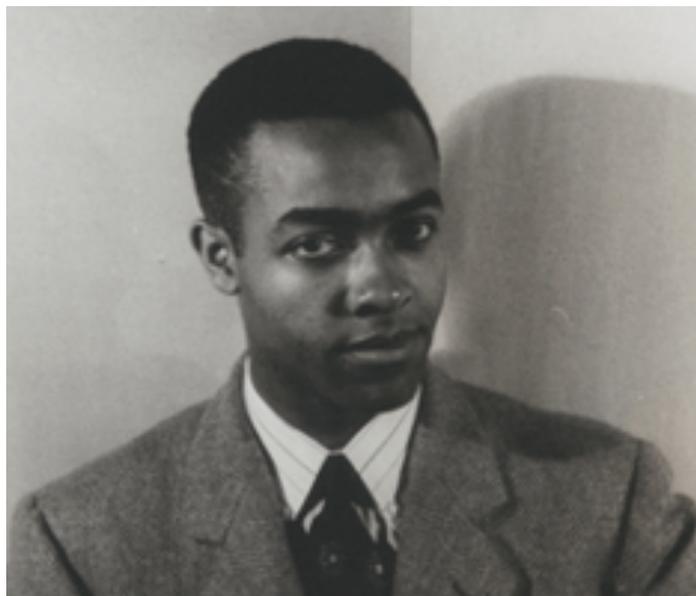
<sup>23</sup> Keefe, William (1954). Jimmy (Lover Man) Davis conquers Spain with songs. *European Stars and Stripes*, May 30.

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_1Jrsw8MoXs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_1Jrsw8MoXs)

<sup>25</sup> Wilmer, 1975b

an alternate version, and actually sang it that way himself on his 1954 record<sup>26</sup>. It is now probably better known as, "Why A Good Girl Is Hard To Find".

The years 1938 to 1941 were good years for Jimmy Davis. He was writing songs - another one was " 'Specially When I'm In A Lovin' Mood" - he was getting them sung by various artists, and even recorded. A 1941 article in the *New York Amsterdam Star-News*<sup>27</sup> stated that he "spends most of his time working diligently over tunes that keep singing through his head." And the New York newspaper *PM* added, "He is serious about his music and works hard at it in his evening hours."<sup>28</sup> The *Englewood Press*<sup>29</sup> wrote that Alois Havrilla, a famous radio announcer who lived in Englewood, introduced Jimmy to musical and radio circles in New York. In fact, at some point, Jimmy moved to New York and lived at 415 West 154th Street. That's when he took a part time job in a department store (elevator operator) to make ends meet. Another paper clipping<sup>30</sup> around this time states, "A clean-cut, well-spoken young man, Jimmy has vowed to wear the ivories to a frazzle (piano variety) in order to carve the Davis name deep into the monument of music makers." It adds, "Right from here, Jimmy feels that everything is rosey...". This is reflected in a document in his US Army file where it is stated that during this period of his life, he was well adjusted, quite happy and enthusiastic about his work. His great ambition, according to the *Englewood Press*<sup>31</sup>, was to write for the motion pictures and had been ever since his student days at Englewood High School. A photo of Jimmy Davis taken by Carl Van Vechten depicts the young and confident professional that he was at that time.



**Jimmy at 27 (1942)**

Courtesy of the Van Vechten Trust,  
Beinecke Library, Yale.

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCrBtvekTgs>

<sup>27</sup> "Jimmy Davis, Songwriter", *New York Amsterdam Star-News*, August 9, 1941.

<sup>28</sup> *PM*, May 8, 1942.

<sup>29</sup> *Englewood Press*, April 24, 1941.

<sup>30</sup> Entitled, "Jimmy Davis hits the big time".

<sup>31</sup> *Englewood Press*, April 24, 1941

## 2. Lover Man

It is in the late 30's and early 40's that "Lover Man" also known as "Lover Man (Oh, Where Can You Be)" was written, sung and recorded for the first time. It is Jimmy Davis' most famous song whose title he used as a nickname starting in the late forties - Jimmy "Lover Man" Davis. Many artists have sung "Lover Man" over the years starting with Billie Holiday<sup>32</sup>, Sarah Vaughan<sup>33</sup>, and Ella Fitzgerald<sup>34</sup>, and musicians have played it such as Charlie Parker<sup>35</sup> and Stan Getz<sup>36</sup> among many others. By 1975, 500 artists had recorded it, according to Val Wilmer<sup>37</sup>. Heaven knows how many more have done so in the last fifty years!<sup>38</sup> Jimmy Davis himself sang "Lover Man" on his 1954 record<sup>39</sup> with these lyrics:

I don't know why but I'm feeling so sad  
 I long to try something I never had  
 Never had no kissing  
 Oh, what I've been missing  
 Lover man, oh, where can you be

The night is cold and I'm so alone  
 I'd give my soul just to call you my own  
 Got a moon above me  
 But no one to love me  
 Lover man, oh, where can you be

I've heard it said  
 That the thrill of romance  
 Can be like a heavenly dream  
 I go to bed with a prayer  
 That you'll make love to me  
 Strange as it seems

Someday we'll meet  
 And you'll dry all my tears  
 Then whisper sweet  
 Little things in my ear  
 Hugging and a kissing  
 Oh, what we've been missing  
 Lover man, oh, where can you be

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<sup>32</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBanjMmV6zQ>

<sup>33</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yvrfDeylTTY>

<sup>34</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MsqDyfEnfOE>

<sup>35</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mJrhOjvDbtg>

<sup>36</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EXgPq5doS88>

<sup>37</sup> Wilmer, 1975b

<sup>38</sup> Among other well known singers of "Lover Man" we find: Whitney Houston, Norah Jones, Jimmy Somerville, Barbra Streisand, Petula Clark, Linda Ronstadt, and many more.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7BXXhKcDZc>

The music analysis of "Lover Man" is best left to experts such as those who write for JazzStandards.com<sup>40</sup>. Jeremy Wilson tells us that "Lover Man" has been called the bluest of ballads which solves the problem of whether it is a blues or a ballad. K. J. McElrath, musicologist for JazzStandards.com adds that it is not a "blues" in the strict sense, but it is suggestive of blues. The historian and blogger, Corey Jarrell, writes that the lyrics are brooding and moody, and contain all the pathos that Billie Holiday became most identified with<sup>41</sup>.

The story of "Lover Man" is complex and we will start telling it here even though we will come back to the song throughout this book since Jimmy Davis often talked about it to Langston Hughes in their correspondence. We should start with myths and/or things that are not correct. For example, in her autobiography<sup>42</sup>, Billie Holiday, whose 1944 version of "Lover Man" is world famous, tells us that Jimmy Davis was in the Army when he wrote it. In fact, he wrote it with Roger "Ram" Ramirez, several years before. She adds that before she could record it, Jimmy had left for Europe with the military. In reality, she recorded it in 1944 and he only left for Europe in 1945. She also writes that she never saw him again and he had to be dead. Luckily, Jimmy came back from his six months in France, and they did meet up again. Finally, she states that Ram Ramirez gets all the credit for "Lover Man". Both Jimmy and he do, in reality.

Val Wilmer in her discussion of "Lover Man"<sup>43</sup> is far closer to the truth. She writes that Jimmy originally put the words of Lover Man to a haunting melody written by the pianist Roger "Ram" Ramirez as far back as 1939. William Keefe, who interviewed Jimmy Davis in 1954, actually moves the date back two years when he mentions "the 1937 number that gave Davis his name as a composer" (Jimmy would still have been at Juillard at the time). Wilmer added that Jimmy did the music for the verse, which remains a part of the song that is seldom sung. In a letter to me<sup>44</sup>, she confirmed that "Lover Man" is indeed a collaboration between Jimmy Davis and Ram Ramirez. As for Jimmy Sherman, who is the third name associated with the song as composer, he is a man to whom they owed a debt, she wrote, and they repaid him by splitting their royalties with him. He had no part in the song-writing process.

Lover Man seems to have had a slow start. Val Wilmer, who became a good friend of Jimmy Davis later on, wrote<sup>45</sup>: "Strangely, nobody liked this song at the beginning," said Davis when I met him in Paris recently. "They said 'Why do you call it 'Lover Man'? They said, 'Change the words, change the music'." The copyright year for "Lover Man" is sometimes given as 1942, but the French jazz specialist, Philippe Baudoin, confirmed to me that there is indeed a 1941 version of it (May 3) with Excelsior Music as the publisher. A newspaper clipping at that time<sup>46</sup> states about Jimmy Davis, "Not so long ago, with Roger Ramirez, pianist for Vernon

<sup>40</sup> <https://www.jazzstandards.com/compositions-0/loverman.htm>

<sup>41</sup> [http://illkeepyouposted.typepad.com/ill\\_keep\\_you\\_posted/2012/02/jimmy-davis-lover-man-1.html](http://illkeepyouposted.typepad.com/ill_keep_you_posted/2012/02/jimmy-davis-lover-man-1.html)

<sup>42</sup> Billie Holiday with William Dufty (1956). *Lady Sings the Blues*. New York: Doubleday.

<sup>43</sup> Wilmer, 1975b

<sup>44</sup> Val Wilmer letter, January 2, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> Wilmer, Valerie (1975b). Jimmy 'Lover Man' Davis talks to Valerie Wilmer. *Swing Journal*, May 26.

<sup>46</sup> "Jimmy Davis, Songwriter", New York Amsterdam Star-News, August 9, 1941.

Andrade, and Jimmy Sherman, the Charioteers accompanist, he wrote a number, 'Lover Man, O Where Can You Be?' which Josephine Hall introduced with great success this summer at the Plantation Club in Long Branch." (Clearly the reporter did not know of Jimmy Sherman's inactive role). Other artists started singing it too before Billie Holiday did. Thus, David Lobosco in his "A trip down memory lane"<sup>47</sup> writes, "In 1943, a flamboyant male torch singer by the name of Willie Dukes began singing "Lover Man" on 52nd Street. Because of Duke's success with the song, Holiday decided to add it to her live shows."

Jimmy Davis also had a role to play in getting Billie Holiday to take it on, and then to record it. Wilmer<sup>48</sup> writes that Jimmy knew Billie for over a year before he plucked up enough courage to show her the song. She told him that the song was great and not to change a thing. "I'll do it and you'll see what happens. And sure enough, said Davis, when she did finally record the song, 'It spread like wildfire' ". Jimmy also told Wilmer<sup>49</sup> that he loved the way she sang it and the way she phrased it. All this took time, as we can see in Jimmy Davis' correspondence with Langston Hughes<sup>50</sup>.

## LOVER MAN (Oh, Where Can You Be?)

Words and Music by JIMMY DAVIS,  
ROGER "RAM" RAMIREZ and JIMMY SHERMAN  
Arranged by ROBERT SCHULTZ

Slow blues (♩ = ♪)

The musical score is presented in two systems. The first system shows the piano introduction with a 'Slow blues' feel and a tempo marking of ♩ = ♪. The piano part features chords E7(#9), Am7, D7, Am7, and D7. The vocal line begins with the lyrics 'I don't know why but I'm feel-ing so sad,'. The second system continues the piano accompaniment with chords Dm7, G9, Dm7, G9, and C7(#9). The vocal line continues with 'I long to try some-thing I've nev-er had; nev-er had no kis-sin'.'

**The first measures of "Lover Man" as  
arranged by Robert Schultz (with permission).**

<sup>47</sup> July 22, 2013: <http://greatentertainersarchives.blogspot.com/2013/07/billie-holiday-in-1940s.html>

<sup>48</sup> Wilmer, 1975a

<sup>49</sup> Wilmer, 1975b.

<sup>50</sup> Langston Hughes papers, Beinecke Library, Yale.

In an August 19, 1943, letter, Jimmy writes, "I hear that Billie Holiday is really going to town with "Lover Man" at the Onyx<sup>51</sup>; patrons even requesting her to sing it. Well, maybe some day I'll be as famous a song writer as yo are." Then, in a November 20, 1943, letter, he writes, "Glad to know that Billie Holiday has been plugging the song at Army Comp. If only she would record it!!". Finally, she did, and on October 30, 1944, Jimmy writes, "Just heard that Billie Holiday has definitely recorded "Lover Man" for Decca, and I've heard that it's a "terrific" recording<sup>52</sup>." It was indeed, and Jimmy Davis did become a famous song writer in the years that followed. We will come back to Jimmy's greatest hit later since it follows him throughout his life. But we will now return to where we left him, in 1941-1942, just at the time that the United States entered the Second World War and Jimmy was drafted into the Army.

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<sup>51</sup> This particular Onyx (jazz venue) had opened in 1942 on 57 West 52nd Street.

<sup>52</sup> The underlining was in the original.

### 3. Time in the Army

Jimmy Davis' life as a rising songwriting composer was brought to a halt by World War II and his three and half years in the US Army. He did not seem to have composed any songs during this time<sup>53</sup>, although he was involved with music in other ways, as we will see. Europe was already at war when the United States, in September 1940, required that all men between the ages of 21 and 45 register for the draft. Jimmy's local board sent him a questionnaire at the time which he filled in. In it, he stated that he was opposed to serving in the military forces that segregated and discriminated solely because of race, creed or color. The US Army did indeed have racial segregation at the time - hence the expression "Jim Crow army" - which included the separation of white and non-white troops, various quotas, inferior training for African American soldiers, discrimination and mistreatment towards them, the quasi impossibility of becoming an officer if one were African American, and so on.

Despite having argued his case over several months, Jimmy was classified as 1A by his Local Board No. 62 in New York on January 6, 1942. This meant that he became available for military service and was subject to immediate induction. On January 12, he wrote to the Board to appeal the decision and stated that he was being denied his constitutional right to serve his country in a capacity where he would not be segregated or otherwise discriminated against because of his race<sup>54</sup>. His appeal was denied and so, on February 26, he wrote to the State Director of Selective Service, General Ames T. Brown, and stated: "I can't stress too much my burning desire to fight Hitlerism and its racial superiority myth". He asked that the General intercede on his behalf for permission to leave the country and enlist in the Canadian forces. "I should be very happy to fight in such a capacity as I understand that segregation because of race, or color is not tolerated in the Canadian armed forces." Once again his request was denied, and so Jimmy appealed higher up, ultimately to President Roosevelt. During the months of waiting, Jimmy volunteered his talents at the Stage Door Canteen, a non-segregated entertainment venue for servicemen at 216 West 44th Street in Manhattan.

Michel Fabre (1991), a French scholar who interviewed Jimmy Davis many years later, tells us that the selection committee had attempted to declare Jimmy unfit for medical reasons, but this was an exemption he staunchly refused to accept. The progressive newspaper *PM*, in New York, decided to support his single-handed defiance, and with the support of such writers as Langston Hughes and Richard Wright, the case of "Private James Davis" was publicized in the press. It is probably at this time that Jimmy and Langston Hughes started their long lasting friendship.

One of the *PM* articles Fabre refers to came out on May 8, 1942<sup>55</sup>. Here are excerpts from it:

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<sup>53</sup> This is expressed in his Army file but he may nevertheless have worked on some old projects.

<sup>54</sup> This and other letters by Jimmy Davis to the US Army are in his correspondence with Langston Hughes at the Beinecke Library at Yale (Langston Hughes Papers, Box 266, folder 4305).

<sup>55</sup> Albert Deutsch (1942). Youth won't fight in Jim Crow Army. *PM*. May, 8.

"Jimmy has a 1A draft classification. He is an intense anti-fascist, and is eager to shoulder a gun against Hitler's hordes. ... In each successive stage of his appeal, officials have expressed a general respect for his feeling, but have told him tactfully and firmly that they cannot sustain his claim that Jim Crow in the armed forces constitutes the kind of injustice that exempts him from service. ... To which soft-spoken Jimmy Davies replies: 'I feel it is my constitutional right to serve my country without being discriminated against because of my race..... I can't for the life of me see how I can honestly fight against Hitlerism in an army that itself practices racial discrimination... why can't we have mixed units here? ... They have worked well in Canada and, with the possible exception of the South, they could work well here. If and when such units are authorized I should love to be among the first to volunteer.' "

Jimmy kept up his fight and after numerous appeals including a night letter to the White House on June 23, he was apprehended by the FBI on July 3, and jailed as a conscientious objector at the Federal House of Detention, on West Street in New York. He was represented by the NAACP at this time. Then, after thirteen days, feeling that he had made his point, he accepted to be inducted into the army. He wrote a letter to various media, including *PM* and the *Englewood Press*, in which he declared:

"Having stated my protest against Jim Crowism in all the forms available to me .... and having been imprisoned in the Federal House of Detention through a desire to improve the democratic process in reference to my own race and my country as a whole, I now feel that no further useful interest could be served by my continued refusal to go into the armed forces, segregated even as they are .... I shall now report for induction into the Armed Forces of the United States, offering all that I have to the service of my country during this hour of peril in our common fight against the Fascist threat from without."

On July 17, a short article in the *New York Herald Tribune* conveyed his decision and indicated that he had been inducted into the Army on July 16 at Governors Island, New York. It is said that Jimmy had won the respect of all the government agencies with which he came into contact during these months of refusal. He also influenced fellow African Americans, not the least being Langston Hughes who according to his biographer, Arnold Rampersad<sup>56</sup>, appended a statement of protest when he sent back his own questionnaire a bit later on. In it, he expressed his complete disapproval of segregation in the Armed Forces of the United States, thus making the colored citizen the only American group singled out for Jim Crow treatment. It seemed to him to be contrary to the letter and spirit of the Constitution.

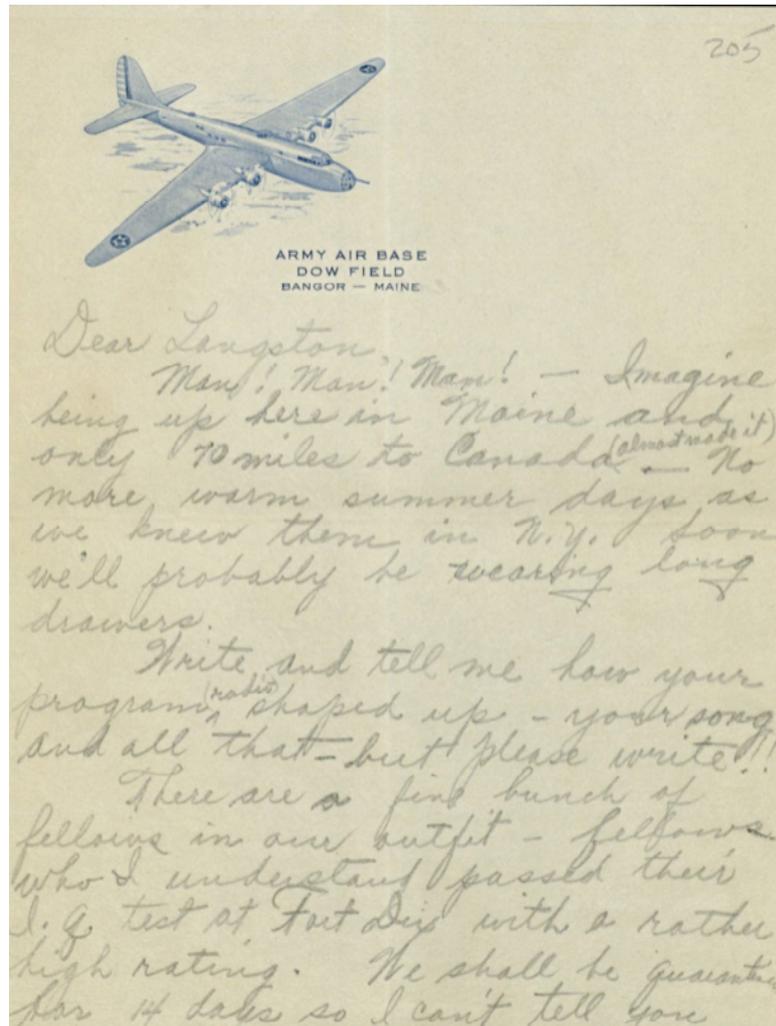
The Armed Forces were finally desegregated in 1948 but not before Jimmy Davis had to suffer the full brunt of discrimination in his three and a half years of active duty. In what follows, we will spend a bit of time on this period, aided by the information which figures in his army file, and by his numerous letters to Langston

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<sup>56</sup> Rampersad, Arnold (2002). *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II: 1941-1967, I Dream a World (Life of Langston Hughes, 1941-1967)* (pp. 52-53). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition

Hughes. It marked him greatly and explains, in large part, his decision to move to France a few years later and stay there for the rest of his life.

After a few days at Fort Dix in New Jersey where he took various tests, Jimmy was assigned to Dow Field, the Army Air Forces base in Bangor, Maine, where he received basic training and then mainly guarded planes. Here is one of his first letters to Langston Hughes sent in late July or early August, 1942.



**Letter written to Langston Hughes in July or August 1942  
(Courtesy of the Beinecke Library at Yale; Langston Hughes Papers)**

In a letter a few weeks later<sup>57</sup>, he writes: "I must confess that I haven't quite gotten used to army life, and so much routine kind of runs against the grain, in spite of many pre-army experiences down on West Street" (this was the Stage Door Canteen). His superiors quickly recognized that Jimmy had officer potential and, after doing well on another series of tests, he applied to go to the Army Music School to become a band leader and Warrant Officer. It is during a furlough at the end of 1942 that Carl Van Vechten photographed him again, this time in his army uniform.

<sup>57</sup> Letter to Langston Hughes (henceforth Hughes), undated (probably August, 1942).



**Private James Edward Davis (1942)**

Courtesy of the Van Vechten Trust,  
Beinecke Library, Yale.

In January 1943, he went down to Portland for four days of Music School exams, practical tests and interviews. One of the things he was asked to do was to conduct an orchestra. This is how he talks about it to Langston<sup>58</sup>: "...we started off by conducting a 40 (forty) piece in a composition we had never conducted before (I drew a Johann Straus<sup>59</sup> Overture - the hardest of the lot). Man, the band actually stood up and applauded after I had finished; they actually thought that I was an honest to goodness conductor. Imagine!!" Jimmy adds that at the end of the four days, the officer conducting the exams told him that he stood an excellent chance of passing and being sent to the school.

What should have been a happy ending to a long exam session was marred by one of the many moments of discrimination that he was to experience during his time in the Army. In the same letter to Langston he recounts what happened to their group (he was the only African American): "The night before we left, the 4 of us went to town for some "sport"; had dinner at the swankiest hotel in town without any friction; went out to some little dinkey night club, "The Morocco" and were refused service because of me. Well, the fellows raised hell but there was nothing to be done at the time about it. One of the boys with tears almost in his eyes declared that he was ashamed that he was born white, what with this country fighting a war for democracy, and such things still going on."

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<sup>58</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 21, 1943

<sup>59</sup> Jimmy Davis wrote "Straus" with one "s". It might be an error (the famous composer's name is written "Strauss") but it could also be, Professor Thüring Braem points out, a reference to Oscar Straus, also a Viennese composer. But then the first name would no longer fit.

This said, his posting in Maine (from August 1942 to April 1943) was one of his better moments during his Army time. In a letter to Langston<sup>60</sup>, probably in October, he wrote: "Lang, pal, would you believe that I've gained 15 lbs? I can't see it, but scales don't lie. For the past few weeks, we have been getting excellent food. Do you think that could be it?". In their correspondence at the time, Langston would tell him how his songs were doing down in New York, and Jimmy would encourage others to sing them up on the base. At about that time, he wrote<sup>61</sup>: "A young soldier from our outfit sang another of my songs last week, "Specially When I'm In A Lovin' Mood". Boy, he sure sold the song to the soldiers (and radio listeners who sent in many letters of praise, etc.). I conducted the band and actually arranged the number for the orchestra." In another letter<sup>62</sup>, he said: "The post band played my "Lover Man" today and was I thrilled."

In April, 1943, Jimmy, newly promoted to corporal, moved down to Fort Myer, Virginia, to attend the three-month Warrant Officer course at US Army Music School. Unfortunately, it started badly for him. Here is what he told Langston<sup>63</sup>: "I thought there would be no discrimination at the Army Music School! There are two other colored lads here and right away they sent us over to a colored unit for our meals and sleeping quarters while the other members of the school will eat and sleep together. I don't dig it. Felt like asking for a transfer back up to Maine and forgetting the whole idea. Frankly, it works an unnecessary hardship upon me in addition to our studies which, understand, will be strenuous." He added, "One of the reasons I took the W.O. exam was because I was told that there was no discrimination at the Army Music School, that the men ate, slept, and otherwise lived together as a group. However, nothing is like that here with us."

Other instances of discrimination occurred and Jimmy told Langston about them. For example, when visitors came to see the conducting class, the African Americans would be rushed through their conduction stint. As for exam grades, those of the African Americans were separated from the rest. Despite these difficulties, Jimmy graduated brilliantly on July 10, and was appointed Warrant Officer. In a letter to Langston a few days later, he inserted below his name, "James E. Davis, WOG, AUS" (the acronyms stand for Warrant Officer, Junior Grade; Army of the United States). We can see Jimmy in the graduation photo below.

Jimmy then joined the 3rd Band AARTC (Anti-Aircraft Replacement Training Center) at Fort Eustis, VA. It was to become the 159th Army Band a few months later. Things went more smoothly for him here. He wrote to Langston<sup>64</sup>: "Have a very nice group of men to work with (32 piece band) and I'm sure that I will like it very much. They already have a fairly good-sized library but there is always the need for more "pop" tunes." It is during that summer that the *Amsterdam News* published a photo of him along with a caption summarizing his accomplishments and stating that he was now

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<sup>60</sup> Letter to Hughes, undated; probably October 1942.

<sup>61</sup> Undated letter to Hughes; probably January or February, 1943.

<sup>62</sup> January 6, 1943.

<sup>63</sup> Letter to Hughes, April 19, 1943.

<sup>64</sup> Letter to Hughes, July 28, 1943

an arranger and band leader in the Army. He also visited his family in Englewood.



**Band Leader Graduates, US Army Music School, 1943**

Jimmy Davis is in the third row from the bottom, fourth from the right

Courtesy of Jacqueline Baraduc

We should stop our narrative here for a moment to talk about the developing friendship between Jimmy and Langston Hughes mainly through the medium of the letters they wrote to one another. Jimmy probably considered him as an older



**Photo of Langston Hughes dedicated to Jimmy Davis.**

Courtesy of the Van Vechten Trust,  
Beinecke Library, Yale.

brother (Langston was 14 years older than him) and a confidant. He would often ask him to send him newspapers and magazines, lend him some money, see if he would be free to come to speak to his men, and so on. He also reacted to Langston's poems and songs, and asked him from time to time if he could stay in his apartment when he came to New York. Jimmy would sometimes tease him about his success<sup>65</sup>, "I do hope that in between your lectures you can still find time to write to a friend - for I'll still be your friend even though you will be making all this money from your lectures (ahem!)." And he told him how much he meant to him<sup>66</sup>: "Pal, you'll never never know how grateful I am for your friendship. God sent you to bolster my morale". The Beinecke Library has far few letters from Langston Hughes to Jimmy Davis, but we can deduce from Jimmy's answers that Langston spent a lot of time bolstering Jimmy's morale and helping him live through this difficult period. Their truly wonderful friendship, and their active correspondence, was to last until Langston Hughes' death in 1967.

While taking care of his band in 1943 and 1944 (e.g. "Gave a program for the Red Cross last week which was a howling success<sup>67</sup>"), Jimmy kept in touch with the popular music world as best he could. It's probably while on leave in New York that he met and interacted with Billie Holiday. He told Val Wilmer<sup>68</sup> they spent many hours together. "She did so much for me," recalled Davis. "She kept me from drugs, for example." He knew that Decca was preparing to record Billie singing Lover Man, and wrote to Langston<sup>69</sup>: "Yes, Decca took our song ... and gave us a \$150 advance (which had to be split three ways). Maybe I'll be a famous person some day yet... If, by chance, you should hear the song on the radio, please let me know as I'd like to know when and if Decca does anything with it."<sup>70</sup>

In May, 1944, Jimmy and his band were transferred to Camp Pickett in Virginia. Even though he told Langston at the beginning that, "So far it is much better here than my former station."<sup>71</sup>, things went downhill for him over the next five months. When he next wrote to Langston, in October, he was hospitalized for depression at the Station Hospital and was on a two weeks' observation. He stated<sup>72</sup>:

"... something seemed to snap and I felt that I couldn't endure Jim Crow any longer; felt it strangling me; felt as if I'd lose my mind any moment ... Lang, I don't know what the outcome of this will be but I don't think I'll be able to stomach any more of this; probably will wind up in a court martial or something, but it haunts me day and night. I can't even concentrate on my military duties; but then maybe I'll get over it after a little rest. If only I could get out of this damn South; I feel that it wouldn't be too bad. ... Other people

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<sup>65</sup> Letter to Hughes, November 10, 1942

<sup>66</sup> Letter to Hughes, November 28, 1942

<sup>67</sup> Letter to Hughes, February 28, 1944

<sup>68</sup> Wilmer, 1975a

<sup>69</sup> Letter to Hughes, February 28, 1944

<sup>70</sup> Letter to Hughes, February 28, 1944

<sup>71</sup> Letter to Hughes, May 25, 1944

<sup>72</sup> Letter to Hughes, October 9, 1944

hate segregation and Jim Crow just as much as I do (so they say) yet it doesn't make them physically ill as it does me now."

He then moved to the Regional Hospital in Camp Lee. He also suffered from back pain, and this is what he wrote to Langston<sup>73</sup>: "It seems that I'll either be sent to an assignment in the north, overseas, or be discharged from the army; I'm just about fed up; have about taken all I can stand of this Jim Crow." On the bright side, he wrote in the same letter that Billie Holiday had definitely recorded "Lover Man" for Decca, that he had heard it, and that it was a terrific recording. It was probably at that time that he was photographed with Billie Holiday<sup>74</sup> (see below).

Jimmy stayed at Camp Lee until March, 1945 and was starting to think of life after the army. He wrote<sup>75</sup>, "If and when I am released, (I) shall head straight for California or Mexico City and relax for two whole months." But this wasn't to be - at least for a year - as a few days later, he announced<sup>76</sup>: "Say, can't remember for the life of me whether I wrote and told you that I have received orders to go overseas - probably to



**Warrant Officer Jimmy Davis and Billie Holiday**

Photo taken in 1944; source unknown

a European Theatre of Operations!". He had sent in his letter of resignation but only after having received his overseas orders and hence nothing could be done. Things happened quickly thereafter and Jimmy sailed with some 10,905 troops on the

<sup>73</sup> Letter to Hughes, October 30, 1944

<sup>74</sup> It is unclear who took this famous photo and who has rights on it. In later years, Jimmy would give it to friends as a present. Jacqueline Baraduc, Clovis Depretz (Don Clovis), Val Wilmer each received it from him, among others. It can also be found on the internet.

<sup>75</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 2, 1945

<sup>76</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 5, 1945

Queen Mary, transformed into a troop ship, on March 18, 1945<sup>77</sup>. In a handwritten note that he left to his friend, Jacqueline Baraduc, dated September 1996, he wrote that it had been a nightmarish crossing as they were not part of a convoy and had to zig zag to avoid German submarines that were chasing them. The enemy radio even announced that their ship had been sunk, but they managed to make it and they landed in Gourrock, Scotland, on March 25. He spent a bit of time in England, and was then transferred to France.

Even though Jimmy was still very much in the Army, and he was no longer in the United States to enjoy the success of Billie Holiday's recording of his song, his life was about to change considerably and for the better. He was just about to turn 30.

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<sup>77</sup> <http://ww2troopships.com/crossings/1945.htm>; see also Calas, André (1963). Ils ont choisi Paris. *Lecture pour tous*, 120, December, 47-51.

#### 4. First taste of France

Whether Jimmy Davis had any contact with French and French culture before arriving in France is not clear. It is interesting to note that in his letters to Langston Hughes between 1942 and 1945, he sometimes used French words or expressions, knowing that Langston knew French and had lived in Paris in 1924 and also visited just before the Second World War. Here are a few instances of French in his letters: "C'est la vie"<sup>78</sup>, "Mais vous êtes mon ami, n'est-ce pas? Et il n'y a pas de quoi."<sup>79</sup>, and "Savez-vous?"<sup>80</sup>. It may be that Jimmy had studied some French in high school, or at Juillard, but there is no evidence that he had ever travelled to France.

Jimmy's first letter to Langston from France (location, "Somewhere in France", dated May 3, 1945) was a V-mail<sup>81</sup> and contained only 17 lines. It started off with some wonderful news after all he had been through: "Paris is just what the doctor ordered." Reflecting on this, almost twenty years later, he told André Calas<sup>82</sup> that visiting Paris, and then actually living there, during those summer months was a breath of fresh air: "I was finally breathing the air of freedom". He also had several bits of news: "Have managed to get about quite a bit.... Have met someone here who is interested in handling the French rights to "Lover Man"... Visited Montmartre and what a place!! ...Had supper with a very fine French family last evening and boy, oh boy, did they go for wine and drink in a big way; even the little kids love it." The only negative note is, "I am extremely unhappy in the Army here; you know the story".

We learn from Michel Fabre (1991) that he was posted at first to a base near Soissons, some 60 miles northeast of Paris. His army file states that he was a Special Services Officer for an engineering battalion. He organized shows, and secured entertainment (it is only later that he would be given a band). Fabre recounts this anecdote which contrasted so much with what Jimmy had experienced back home: "He was at Soissons when VE Day was celebrated on May 8, 1945, and, along with a couple of other black American officers, was invited to the home of a French family. While they were feasting, white American officers attempted to teach their host how to treat (them) - by excluding them - and were thrown out of the house. This convinced Davis that France was a land of freedom and racial equality...".

A bit less than two months later, a longer letter to Langston<sup>83</sup> from Reims gives us more good news: on the positive spirit he found in France ("France is really on the ball, indeed in spite of 5-6 years occupation by the enemy."), on the way African American soldiers were welcomed ("Believe me, the colored soldiers have won the hearts of these French. Everywhere I go, they voluntarily tell me how much more they like the colored than the other."), on his French ("I get along fairly well with the

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<sup>78</sup> Letter to Hughes, undated (probably September / October 1942)

<sup>79</sup> Letter to Hughes, November 10, 1942

<sup>80</sup> Letter to Hughes, February 4, 1945.

<sup>81</sup> V-mail used special forms which were microfilmed and sent by plane to their destination. On the other end, they were reproduced and delivered.

<sup>82</sup> Calas, André (1963). Ils ont choisi Paris. *Lecture pour tous*, 120, December, 47-51.

<sup>83</sup> Letter to Hughes, July 4, 1945

language"), and to Langston's surprise and joy probably, on Jimmy falling in love ("Have fallen madly in love with a very nice person here. She is 20, sings exceptionally well, from a good family (father a lawyer), and she loves me! ..."). We learn a bit later that she is called Huguette.

Concerning his status in the Army, Jimmy writes that he resubmitted his resignation, and that once discharged, he would study harmony, arranging, piano and French at the Conservatoire in Paris under the G.I. Bill of Rights which provided various benefits to veterans of World War II including grants for school and college tuition. In fact, as it happened, he didn't have to wait that long to study in a university environment. He wrote to Langston on July 28, "Am studying French language and civilization here in Paris at the Sorbonne and shall be here until 8 Sept '45." What had happened is that the US Army had wanted to offer to some of their soldiers and officers temporary access to education in schools and colleges in France now that the war was over and before they were transferred back to the United States. So, in Paris for example, some 600 "student soldiers" (étudiants soldats) were offered a two-month language and culture course at the Sorbonne. Jimmy applied and was accepted. Charles Cestre's description of what happened<sup>84</sup> showed how welcoming the French educational authorities were (they organized and paid for everything), and how much the American students enjoyed this experience.

Since the lycées in the Latin Quarter were closed for the summer, they were used as dormitories. The students were divided into four levels based on their level of French. Mornings were spent in courses - language, literature, history, French culture - and afternoons were used for various visits including trips to the Louvre, Versailles, Fontainebleau and Chartres. The teachers ranged all the way from primary school teachers for beginners to senior high school teachers for advanced students. An opening ceremony was held in the imposing Grand Amphithéâtre de la Sorbonne (the main auditorium) which I was to discover myself in its splendor as an entering student some twenty years later, and with a smoke filled riotous ambiance as a May 68 protester a few years later!

Teachers would have their midday meal with the students and some would even invite a few to their homes in the evenings or on weekends. The atmosphere was convivial and cooperative. For example, one student, a member of the US Women's Army Corps, had the idea of collecting candy and chocolate from other students for French children in poorer neighborhoods. It was probably during these two months that Jimmy met my parents who were both very keen on jazz - my father was soon to become an administrator of the Hot Club de France - and that Jimmy had some words of encouragement for my mother when she learned she was expecting me<sup>85</sup>. Both of them remained friends with Jimmy over the years, even though they were to separate in 1947. The closing ceremony (Fête de clôture) was held at the Centre Américain de Paris and Jimmy presented three pieces: a "Fugue Moderno" (in the

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<sup>84</sup> Charles Cestre (1946). Les étudiants-soldats américains dans les universités françaises. *The French Review*, 19(4), 233-237.

<sup>85</sup> See the Introduction.

manner of J. S. Bach), and two songs: "Vous vivez dans mon coeur" and "Why Is A Good Man So Hard To Find".

In a letter to Langston at the end of the course<sup>86</sup>, Jimmy announced that he would soon be a civilian and that he had plans for afterwards: "At long last, the W.D. (War Department) has accepted my resignation and I shall be home by 1 Oct and a civilian shortly afterwards. ... Shall stay in the East for a few days and head for California for a "rest" and afterwards will make a 'stab' at writing for the movies. ... See you soon." He left France at the end of the month on a Victory ship and was sent to the Separation Center at Fort Dix where he was discharged after a few weeks.

So ended three and a half years of Army time which had been very difficult for Jimmy. He now put his hopes on starting a different life in California, but probably with a fall back plan of returning to France if ever it didn't work out. He had made friends there and had a few professional contacts which he could activate in case of need.

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<sup>86</sup> Letter to Hughes, 15 September 1945

## 5. California

There is very little substantial information on Jimmy's year and a half in California apart from what he told Langston in three letters. In the first one<sup>87</sup>, in which he gave his address as 1245 South Arlington Avenue, Los Angeles 6, California, he wrote: "Did I tell you that I'm studying at the Actors' Lab in Hollywood? Yes, I am, and doing rather well (GI Bill of Rights)." The Actors' Laboratory Theatre was a theatre company and acting school founded in 1941. According to Jennifer Frost<sup>88</sup>, it "prided itself on having opened its doors to students of all races". Jimmy added, "The course lasts for a year, so I'll probably be here that long, at least - though I'm home-sick for N.Y. and friends like you."<sup>89</sup> He also sent him one of his new songs, unnamed, that had been recorded and would soon be released. Optimistically, Jimmy added, "I hope to make lots of money on the song!"

The other two letters were from 1947. In the first<sup>90</sup>, he started with: "If nothing breaks for me here am definitely leaving for France around June or July." We see from this that the idea in the back of his mind of returning there had started to blossom. But he wasn't quite ready to give up on California: "This acting bug has really got me and I am gradually developing into what I hope will be my way of really contributing something in 'our common struggle' ... Just recently played in the new play called, "To the Living", which was put on by the Actors' Lab. We got some very good notices. In Dec 28th Billboard, we got a wonderful write-up ... We haven't lost hope of the show coming to Broadway. .... Wish I had the money, I'd take it to Broadway myself."<sup>91</sup> His songwriting work wasn't producing much, however: "Nothing new is happening with my music (songs) and don't have the contact to really exploit it (them). I need an agent."

Langston wrote back from Atlanta with some news about his songs to boost his morale<sup>92</sup>: "Duke (Ellington) played your song, "Lover man", when he was here at the City Auditorium. The other day I heard June Christe singing it on the air. And I read in last week's "Variety" that Lena Horne is using it. I wish that "Blue Valley" could get as good a start, because it seems to me to be just as beautiful a song." This new song, with the subtitle "Where My Dreams Can't Come True", was written with Russell Daville and copyrighted in 1946. It was to become one of Jimmy's most famous songs over time and can be heard on the French National Library's reedition of his 1954 record sung by Jimmy himself<sup>93</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> Letter to Hughes, May 4, 1946

<sup>88</sup> Frost, Jennifer (2011). *Hedda Hopper's Hollywood: Celebrity Gossip and American Conservatism*. New York: New York University Press. ISBN 9780814728246.

<sup>89</sup> Jacqueline Baraduc told me that Jimmy had been awarded the Actors' Lab 1946 Richard Fiske scholarship award.

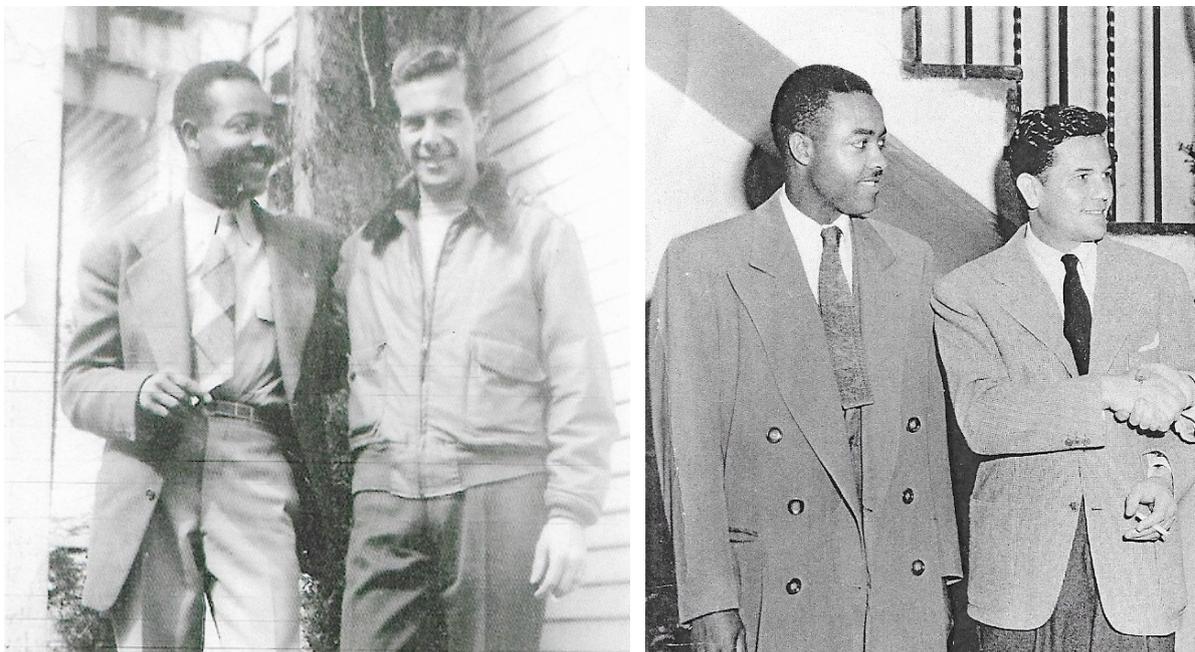
<sup>90</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 17, 1947

<sup>91</sup> Boris Vian in his *Jazz-Hot* article on Jimmy Davis (19, January, 1948) indicates that he had also played in Ben Johnson's *Volpone* out in California.

<sup>92</sup> Letter from Langston Hughes to Jimmy Davis: April 22, 1947

<sup>93</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GiYyMZ75t8>

Jimmy's third and last letter from California<sup>94</sup> had two main parts. In one, he talked about how "Lover Man" was doing: "Thanks for letting me know who is doing "Lover Man". Duke has made a Victor recording of it (not released yet). ... Met Lena Horne for the first time a month ago and she told me that she had been featuring it and it always went over well. ... June Christie made a transcription of it for Capitol and Stan Kenton has a "mad" arrangement on it just for his band. ... Lang, that song is in the catalog of practically every big band in the country yet the publishers (Sun-Decca) won't push it and make a "hit" song of it. My royalty statement for the last quarter was only ninety-one dollars (\$91). Can you tie that?" He then added, "I have had no luck with my songs and have only landed a small record (Aladdin) on my "Specially When I'm In A Lovin' Mood" and made only \$60 on it." He also talked about a young singer, Emma Lou Welch, who sang his songs but that he was having problems getting her to record them.



**Jimmy Davis at Actors' Laboratory Theatre, Los Angeles  
(Courtesy Jacqueline Baraduc)**

In the other part of the letter, he stated that he would be leaving Los Angeles at the end of that week to spend some time with his sister, Hazel, in Washington who had just lost her husband. "Then I intend to go to Englewood and stay for about a month and find some way to get to France. ... Yes, I've definitely decided to return." The main reason he put forward was the discrimination he was experiencing continually: "Something must be wrong with me, Lang, because I can't take anymore of this s-- here in the States. I get physically sick when I encounter it. I'll probably return to the States but at the present time I'll go nuts if I don't get away. Since the Army, I haven't been able to adjust at all, and have only stayed here this long because I was getting some excellent training as an actor at the Actors' Lab here in Hollywood. Training which I hope to be able to put to better use in the less restricted country of France."

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<sup>94</sup> Letter to Hughes, April 28, 1947

Michel Fabre (1991) gives us a few more details<sup>95</sup>: "Davis went back to the United States where he studied dramatic art at the First Actors' Group in Hollywood. He was offered parts in several films, but always those of servants. Disgusted after a few months of daily discrimination in hotels and public places, he decided to settle in Paris for good."

Jimmy was optimistic that things would work out for him in France: "I have many friends there who are "looking out" for me and all I have to do is get my fare." He added, "A French company is being formed in Paris with French (Black Africans); that's what I'd really like!!" Jimmy found the fare, and crossed over on the Queen Elizabeth in early October, 1947. He sent a postcard of the vessel to Langston on October 8 with one last comment on what had made him suffer for so many years<sup>96</sup>: "This ship is just as prejudiced as the American ones. If I had known, I'd have waited for a year to take a French one."

In 1963, André Calas<sup>97</sup>, writing for the French magazine, *Lecture pour tous*, came back on why Jimmy returned to France. He stated that he settled in Paris deliberately so as to live free of prejudices in his home country. He imitated in this way, said Calas, other famous Black artists such as Sidney Béchét, June Richmond, the Peters Sisters and, before them, the most famous of them all, Joséphine Baker. It is noteworthy that in Jimmy's letters to Langston over the next 20 years, no comments on discrimination appeared again, even if Jimmy did experience prejudice a few times. In a note written many years later<sup>98</sup>, Jimmy stated: "It is when I came back to France, after the war, having been demobilized, that I decided to stay and live there as I felt happy and free; I never went back on my choice."

Jimmy ended his card to Langston with, "Will just about break even when I reach Paris Friday at 5:32, and will be happy to get there!! Wish me luck...". A new life, in a land that he hardly knew, with a language that he had just started to learn, was about to begin for him. He was not to return to the United States - the country of his birth, his youth, and his early successes - for some 34 years!

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<sup>95</sup> Michel Fabre (1991). *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press. p. 165.

<sup>96</sup> Postcard to Hughes, October 8, 1947.

<sup>97</sup> Calas, André (1963). Ils ont choisi Paris. *Lecture pour tous*, 120, December, 47-51.

<sup>98</sup> This September 1996 note was written in French and was shared with me by Jacqueline Baraduc.

## 6. Back to France

The welcome Jimmy received couldn't have been better. Hugues Panassié, the founding president of the Hot Club de France, actually came to the train station to greet him. Jimmy added this<sup>99</sup>, "He has made everything easy for me here... I have several appointments with publishers and musicians this next week and they all seem enthused over using my music." Boris Vian, an important figure in the French jazz scene at that time, was extremely laudatory of Jimmy in an article he wrote for *Jazz-Hot*<sup>100</sup>. He said that one of the youngest and friendliest American composers, and also an actor, Jimmy "Lover Man" Davis<sup>101</sup>, was now in Paris. He mentioned his hits so far such as "Lover Man", "Why Is A Good Man So Hard To Find", "Especially", "When I'm In A Lovin' Mood", "Blue Valley", etc. and stated that French orchestras were already playing some of his compositions.

After living near Pigalle for a short while, Jimmy found more permanent lodging in a guesthouse, Villa Pax, in the Quartier Latin near the famous rue Mouffetard. In a letter to Mrs. Harper<sup>102</sup>, Langston's "Aunt Toy", he wrote, "I am now living in a "Pension de la famille"<sup>103</sup> where I sleep (share a room, very large with fireplace, with a very intelligent Italian actor, Jean Franco de Bosio<sup>104</sup>) and eat (extremely well) for 10,000 francs a month (roughly \$83). I was very lucky to find such a place!" In January 1948, Jimmy changed roommates and welcomed Aaron Bridgers who had just arrived from the United States. This rather tall artist, three years younger than Jimmy, had studied classical piano before becoming a student of Art Tatum. He had lived in New York with Billy Strayhorn from 1939 to 1947 and had shared a love for all things French with him. Like Jimmy, Aaron was to make France his country of adoption, and he lived and worked there for the rest of his life. He was Jimmy's best American friend in Paris for half a century, and actually arranged for Jimmy's funeral service when he passed away in 1997.

The Villa Pax no longer exists but one of the lodgers in those days, Jacques Bargues from Montauban, now 96 years old, wrote to me to say that he had known Jimmy and Aaron there at that time. He had immediately become friends with the two of them even though it was sometimes difficult to communicate with them as they did not share a language they all knew well. His room was next to theirs which was much bigger than his, but not terribly luxurious: a sink, two beds, a cupboard, a table, chairs, and especially an upright piano. He kindly shared with me a photo of Jimmy and Aaron on the steps of the villa taken in May 1948 (see below). Others lodgers at the time were the mime, Marcel Marceau, and the painter and lithographer, Leif Knudsen.

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<sup>99</sup> Letter to Hughes, October 19, 1947

<sup>100</sup> Vian, Boris (1948). Jimmy Davis "Lover Man". *Jazz-Hot*, 19, January.

<sup>101</sup> This is the first time I found "Lover Man" attached to his name. Jimmy probably decided to use it as a nickname on his return to France.

<sup>102</sup> Letter to Aunt Toy, late November 1947

<sup>103</sup> This is how Jimmy wrote it; we would normally write, "Pension de famille".

<sup>104</sup> This is how Jimmy wrote his name in his letter, but it may have been Gianfranco de Boso, according to Jacqueline Baraduc.



**Aaron Bridgers and Jimmy Davis at  
Villa Pax, Paris 5, in May 1948  
(Courtesy Jacques Bargues)**

One of the very first things Jimmy did when he arrived in France was to join the French Sacem (Society of Authors, Composers and Publishers of Music, see below).

**DEMANDE D'ADMISSION**  
..... 2 un dossier compositeur

En qualité d **AUTEUR** et compositeur  
sous les auspices de MM<sup>rs</sup> Bétove et R. Brunel

*Davis*

prénoms *James Edward*  
pseudonyme *Jimmy "lover man" Davis*  
épouse de  
nationalité *américain (u.s.a) né à Madison USA le 15 Avril 1915*  
demeurant à *Paris V*

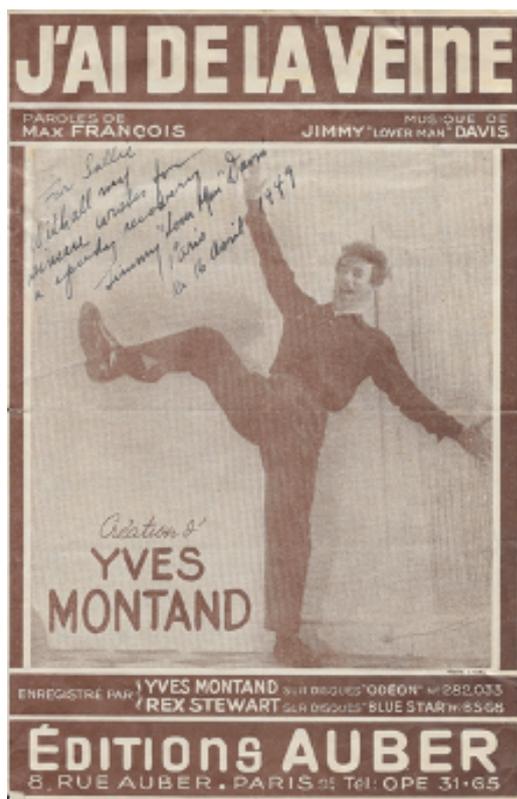
Date de présentation du dossier au Conseil	Date de l'admission sans examen	Date de l'examen donné	Date de l'admission après examen	Date et durée de l'ajournement	Observations
<i>9 Dec 1947</i>	<i>10 Dec 1947</i>				<i>Comme auteur de paroles anglaises exclusivement. Hilt Rocher</i>

**Jimmy Davis' application for songwriter membership  
at the Sacem, 1947 © Sacem Archives<sup>105</sup>**

<sup>105</sup> See here for other Sacem documents concerning Jimmy Davis:  
<https://musee.sacem.fr/index.php/Detail/objects/94941>

He had tried to join the American equivalent, ASCAP, but they had refused his application for the third time before he left the United States<sup>106</sup>. The president of the French society met with Jimmy, signed his application form, told him he liked his songs, and said that he would arrange for him to have a small program on the French radio.

In his many letters to Langston, in the late 1940's, Jimmy would tell him who was playing his music and/or singing his songs. For example, Benny Goodman, recorded his "The Blues Jumped Up And Got Me"<sup>107</sup>; Django Rheinhardt, a much respected Belgian-born, French Romani jazz guitarist, recorded "Lover Man"; Tony Proteau and his orchestra played some of his compositions at the Salle Pleyel (the equivalent of the Carnegie Hall), and Aimé Barelli and his orchestra, in the same hall, played "Blue Valley" and "Specially When I'm In A Lovin' Mood". In a December 1947 letter<sup>108</sup>, Jimmy talked for the first time about Rex Stewart, an American cornetist, who was touring Europe at the time. He said, "Wrote a "boogie" for Rex Stewart ("J'ai de la veine"<sup>109</sup>) and he recorded it for Blue Star<sup>110</sup> here, and yesterday I played it for Yves Montand (French Sinatra) and he went wild about (it) and promised to sing it. If he does, it will become a hit overnight. Wish me luck!!".



J'ai de la veine  
C'est malgré moi  
Car de la peine,  
Je n'men donn' pas !  
C'est pas la peine,  
De m'demander  
Pourquoi  
Ni comment je fais ça  
Moi !

Dès mon enfance  
J'étais heureux!  
J'avais d'la chance  
A tous les jeux !  
Et quand je pense  
A tous mes rêves bleus  
Oui !  
Je suis un(!) verni(e)  
Dans la vie !

Je vis  
Sans autre envie  
Que de voir le ciel, le jour et la nuit !  
Je ris  
De mes ennuis  
Car ils s'enfuient quand je ris !

Front cover of the "J'ai de la veine" sheet music and extract of the song

<sup>106</sup> This is stated in his letter to Hughes, October 19, 1947.

<sup>107</sup> Letter to Hughes, June 1, 1948

<sup>108</sup> Letter to Hughes, December 12, 1947

<sup>109</sup> The English title is "I'm the Luckiest Fool (in the World)"

<sup>110</sup> A record label in France at the time.

Several years later, William Keefe<sup>111</sup> reported that Jimmy had written it in 15 minutes and still didn't know how he had done it. Jimmy found a French lyricist for it, Max François, and Yves Montand did sing it and made it into a hit. When I went through my mother's belongings after her death, I found a copy of the sheet music dedicated to her by Jimmy (see above). The French lyrics are very uplifting, good humored, and reflect the mood of a typical Parisian street guy - "un titi parisien" (an extract is given on the right).

"J'ai de la veine" was a real success as we can see from his letters at the time. In April, 1949 he wrote<sup>112</sup> "Aimé Barelli and his orchestra put my song ... in a film yesterday and we also now have four recordings of it." We should note that Jimmy had another great success at the time: "You're The Greatest Love" (music by Jo Bouillon and Pierre Guillermin) which Joséphine Baker sang accompanied by Jo Bouillon and his orchestra. Jimmy and Joséphine remained friends for many years after that.

Jimmy not only wrote songs during this period, he also sang them, both on the radio and in cabaret-bars such as Le Boeuf sur le Toit (The Ox on the Roof). He was cautious about accepting anything offered, however. As he wrote to Mrs. Harper<sup>113</sup>, "There are also many other clubs that have asked me to sing but, although I need the money badly, I think it best to look over everything and choose the one most suited to me (my voice, intimacy, etc.)." This said, and to help make ends meet - he simply couldn't live off his royalties - Jimmy performed in various venues. Thus, for example, Fabre and Williams (1996) indicate that he would sing at Chez Honey, an African-American club gallery and jazz café. Many musicians performed there including Kenny Clarke, Don Byas, James Moody, and so on. And there were also guest artists such as Duke Ellington and Lena Horne. Another cabaret was L'Ecluse. One day, I received an email from Paul Braffort, a well-known French academic but also a song writer and singer, who told me that he had met and heard Jimmy there. It is situated on the lovely Quai des Grands Augustins in Paris which I know well as I lived near there for many years as a student in the 60's. He added that he often relistened to Billie Holiday's version of Lover Man and thought of its composer who had done some prison time in defense of his opinions!

Jimmy told Langston that he wasn't always paid for performing but it helped give him publicity and get to be known. For example, in late 1948, he told Langston<sup>114</sup>: "Last week I recorded six of my songs for the French Radio and they promised to give me lots and lots of publicity on their national hook-ups in a few weeks. ... Am really building up a name which I hope to cash in on heaven knows where"!

During those first years in France, Jimmy also travelled abroad to perform. Thus, in 1948, he was invited to participate in a program dedicated to African American Art in Padova, Italy. Langston Hughes' *Mulatto* was presented, and Jimmy was also asked

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<sup>111</sup> Keefe, William (1954). Jimmy (Lover Man) Davis conquers Spain with songs. *European Stars and Stripes*, May 30.

<sup>112</sup> Letter to Hughes, April 26, 1949

<sup>113</sup> Letter to Aunt Toy, late November 1947

<sup>114</sup> Letter to Hughes, November 10, 1948

to sing. Here is what he said<sup>115</sup>: "They went wild about me!! Can you imagine. I sang ... "Nobody Knows The Trouble I've Seen" and "Everytime I Feel the Spirit", then three of my songs (2 encores after). We gave two performances in Padova and one in Venice... Was made honorary member of three Hot Clubs: Venice, Padova, Vicenza.... Didn't make any money (they only paid my expenses) but had a wonderful vacation, returning to Paris to go to school (GI Bill) and study Italian and French. Really have to do it now as I'm on my last leg. However, my morale is much better because of the trip." Sometime he travelled less far, and would accept to spend time in the South of France during the summer months for work. Here is an example<sup>116</sup>, "Start to work ... (Juan-les-Pins) ...next week for a month. Inez Cavanaugh and Aaron Bridgers are working in vicinity (doing very well too)."

Living in France after the war was difficult and many amenities were missing. So Jimmy would call on his friend, Langston, to help. Here is an example<sup>117</sup>: "Say, Lang, if you could do something great for me if you would. There are so many things that are scarce here that you could send me.... I need some chocolates (contains energy), cigarettes (Camel), Nescafé, cocoa, kippered herring, sugar, condensed milk, sardines, canned American cheese, canned honey, canned jams. ... if you can send any of them, it would really mean so much." At other times, Jimmy would ask him for news from the US<sup>118</sup>: "Say Man, can you send me any papers, magazines, etc. I must know what's going on; colored papers, Downbeat, etc." And Langston almost invariably came through, having known scarcity and loneliness in Paris himself when he was there in 1924. As Jimmy wrote<sup>119</sup>, "A package here is like an oasis in a desert...".

At other times, Jimmy would ask him to lend him some money<sup>120</sup>: "Lang, can you lend me another fifty dollars... Have managed to pay my way along on what I've earned here but now I need a bit of help." Another time he wrote<sup>121</sup>: "Wrote to you a while back asking for an immediate loan of \$50... you see, with \$50 of American money, I can manage for a whole month." Langston would see what he could do, and Jimmy would always be grateful for whatever arrived. For example<sup>122</sup>, "Received everything O.K. Thanks! Could kiss you; hope to be out of this hole soon." Here is another example<sup>123</sup>, "... this is the last time I think I can ask you for a loan because you've been too generous already; thanks Pal". Of course, it wasn't the last time, both knew it, and it was all part of their friendship. The money Langston sent him would help him live, pay his lodging, and get around... but also buy clothes. In April, 1949<sup>124</sup>, he wrote: "I am in terrible need of something to wear (haven't bought one single piece of clothing since I came here and my old clothes are about shot to pieces; worn out seat, cuffs (pants) and sleeves, etc.... Had to refuse this week a

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<sup>115</sup> Letter to Hughes, May 1, 1948

<sup>116</sup> Postcard to Hughes, July 25, 1949

<sup>117</sup> Letter to Hughes, December 12, 1947

<sup>118</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 24, 1948

<sup>119</sup> Letter to Hughes, September 11, 1948

<sup>120</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 24, 1948

<sup>121</sup> Letter to Hughes, September 11, 1948

<sup>122</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 6, 1948

<sup>123</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 7, 1948:

<sup>124</sup> Letter to Hughes, April 26, 1949

dinner party in honor of the Duke and Duchess of Windsor who just returned from England because I didn't have a tuxedo. I was asked to sing some of my songs."

When things really got bad on the financial side, Jimmy would fall back on the remaining year or two of schooling that he had on the GI Bill. So, for example, in 1948, he wrote to Langston<sup>125</sup>: "My papers finally came through from the States giving me permission to study and I'm going down and enroll tomorrow. ... Shall study Italian with a view to going there to sing and exploit my things. From this experience am sure it's better there for me (however will keep Paris as a base)." It didn't thrill him, "I am now in school 5 hours everyday and hating it like mad<sup>126</sup>", and he would drag his feet going to courses<sup>127</sup>: "Have cut so many classes that I've been warned by the VA, but this school stuff is killing me." However, Jimmy also took singing classes, and this was much more to his liking<sup>128</sup>: "I am now studying singing (with a former "Met" singer (French)) not to change my voice but for volume, control, etc. She, my teacher, is very pleased with my progress (and so am I)."

At the end of these first years in France - 1947 to 1949 - Jimmy knew what to expect. Life in his new country was not going to be easy and he sometimes expressed his frustration: "Things have slowed down considerably with me; almost to a stand still."<sup>129</sup> ; "Looks like my streak of luck has broken."<sup>130</sup>, and "Had to leave Paris to look for work. Nothing there for me."<sup>131</sup> But he had no regrets he had moved to France, and remained quite optimistic, as he wrote to Langston: "Am not discouraged as things still look very good<sup>132</sup>"; "Am really building up a name which I hope to cash in on heaven knows where!"<sup>133</sup>; "Things moving but when the hell am I going to start making money?"<sup>134</sup>". The next ten years would be important for him. Could he make it in a country he was still getting to know, and whose language he had began mastering surprisingly well?

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<sup>125</sup> Letter to Hughes, May 1, 1948

<sup>126</sup> Letter to Hughes, June 1, 1948

<sup>127</sup> Letter to Hughes, November, 1948

<sup>128</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 24, 1949

<sup>129</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 24, 1948

<sup>130</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 7, 1948

<sup>131</sup> Postcard to Hughes, July 25, 1949, from Nice where he worked in the summer.

<sup>132</sup> Letter to Hughes, September 11, 1948

<sup>133</sup> Letter to Hughes, November 10, 1948

<sup>134</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 24, 1949

## 7. Settling down

In this chapter, we will report on Jimmy's next ten years in France, from 1950 to 1960. We will do so chronologically as he spent practically a year in Spain about halfway through, as we will see. He also changed lodgings at least twice. In 1950, he wrote to Langston<sup>135</sup>, "Didn't remember or not (if) I gave you my new Paris address or not. It is: 38, rue Montmorency, Paris 3e, France." Jimmy had said goodbye to Villa Pax and was now living in a "garçonnière" (bachelor apartment) as labelled by André Calas (1963). It was in the center of Paris, on the right bank, right next to the Marais. He was to stay there for about three years.

Jimmy had started singing his own songs in public when he arrived. We saw that he had taken singing lessons and little by little he developed his own act. By the early fifties, he was having a lot of success with it, either by himself or with several others. He reported,<sup>136</sup> "Have built up a little act of my own songs (with bass and guitar, me at the piano); goes over very well!". It was during that period that he spent some time in The Netherlands which he told Langston about<sup>137</sup>: "This engagement is about the most successful (artistically) that I've had in Europe. I've gotten some excellent write-ups from Dutch papers... it can be a big stepping stone to something good. We shall see!". Below is a photo of him in Amsterdam which he shared with Boris Vian and his family:



**Jimmy at La Cubana, Amsterdam, 1950**  
 Courtesy *Archives Cohérie Boris Vian*

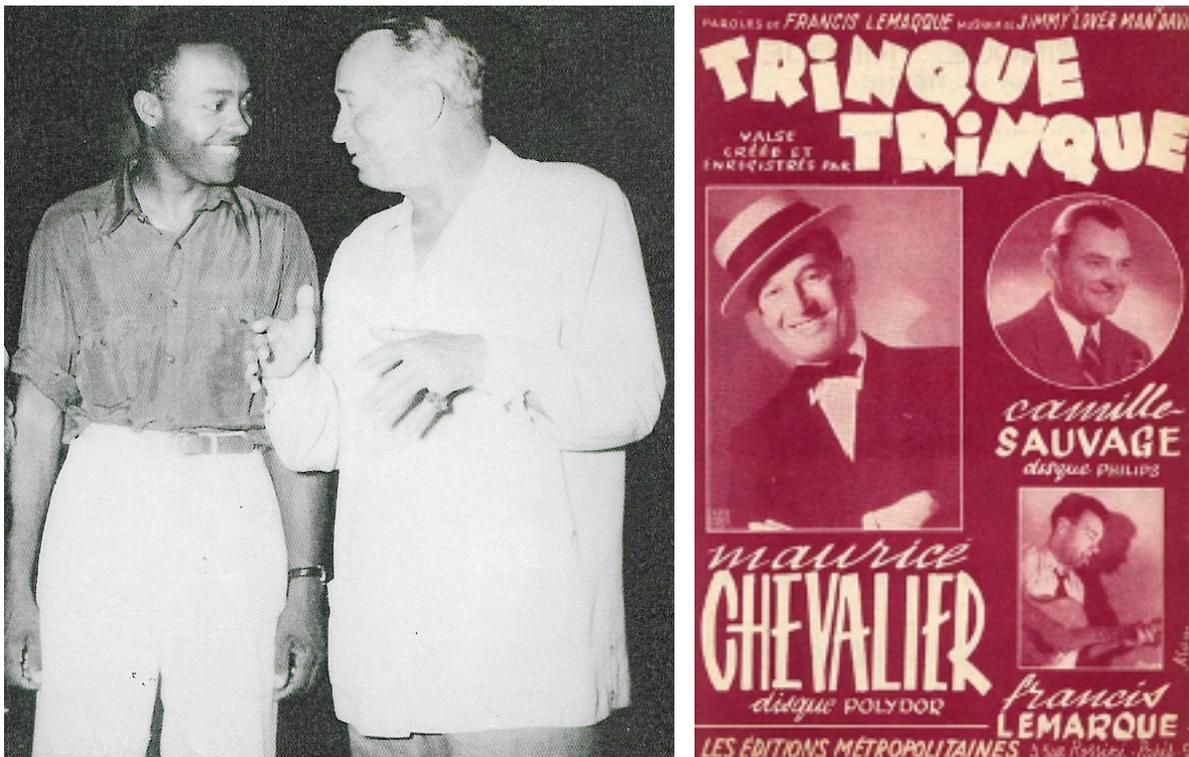
<sup>135</sup> Letter to Hughes, June 11, 1950

<sup>136</sup> Letter to Hughes, June 11, 1950

<sup>137</sup> Letter to Hughes, June 11, 1950

Jimmy also toured other countries, most notably Switzerland<sup>138</sup>: "Just came back from Switzerland where I had great artistic success singing and playing my own songs." I was intrigued by this and so I looked for traces of his visit to Neuchâtel, the university town I now live in. I found that he had given two galas at a fancy hotel, "Beau-Rivage", and that the local paper<sup>139</sup> stated that he was the most famous African American singer-songwriter at that time! The English of the person who wrote the announcement wasn't optimal, though, as he named him "Jimmy 'Lower Man' Davis"! As always, Langston was extremely supportive and wrote<sup>140</sup>, "I'm de-lighted at the news of your act and your songs. Hope you get some BIG U.S. recording too."

During this very creative time for Jimmy, things were indeed moving on the songs and recordings front. He was happy to tell Langston about this<sup>141</sup>: "Maurice Chevalier has just recorded a song of mine called, "Trinque, Trinque" (French words by Francis Lemarque). He thinks it's going to be a great song. Just told me that I was a great writer and had a great future ahead of me. All I ask is when? when? when?". It is a drinking song and Chevalier does a good job getting more and more tipsy as he sings it<sup>142</sup>. Jimmy with Chevalier is shown below as is the first page of the song's sheet music:



**Jimmy with Maurice Chevalier (courtesy Jacqueline Baraduc)  
and the front cover of the "Trinque, Trinque" sheet music**

<sup>138</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 15, 1951

<sup>139</sup> Feuille d'Avis de Neuchâtel (FAN), February 17, 1951

<sup>140</sup> Letter from Langston Hughes to Jimmy Davis, March 22, 1951

<sup>141</sup> Letter to Hughes, Easter, 1951

<sup>142</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLcutHaTQyQ>

It is during this time that Jimmy played a small part in the 1952 movie of Jean-Paul Sartre's "The Respectful Prostitute" (*La Putain respectueuse*) directed by Charles Brabant and Marcello Pagliero. There is a cabaret scene in it where Jimmy was the vocalist accompanied by Bill Coleman, trumpet, Aaron Bridgers, piano, Jo Benjamin, bass, and Bill Clark, drums. In his autobiography<sup>143</sup>, in addition to listing these names, Bill Coleman wrote that they had to play several numbers but that he could only remember one, a composition of Jimmy's, "Cause I'm Black".

At the beginning of 1953, Jimmy told Langston that he was in a bad state, "no work, morale so low"<sup>144</sup>. Things didn't seem to pick up that much the next months and so Jimmy decided to move to Spain, at least for a while. Here is what he wrote to Langston<sup>145</sup>: "Have decided to move to Spain! Paris is much much too expensive these days and I just can't make it! (Italy is also expensive!). But Spain is about the cheapest country in Europe (in spite of (the) regime!). I will probably stay in Madrid or Barcelona. ... I leave around Sept 1st and while there will try to "pick up" on the language and also write some songs "à l'espagnol"". And to show how dire the situation was, he added: "After Spain, if I can get a good price for my songs in America .. I will probably come back to N.Y. for a few months along about next spring or summer." His return for business is a topic that came back again and again in his letters to Langston, but many years would pass before Jimmy actually did return. Langston, who knew Spain well, and as ever positive, wrote to him at the beginning of October<sup>146</sup>: "Estas en España o no? Or are you still in Paris? The Spanish people are wonderful. You're bound to love them, Valencia or Madrid more than Barcelona, I think, though. Let me know where to send your Christmas card."

Jimmy was absent from Paris - in Spain but also other countries - from September, 1953, to the spring of 1954. He used up the remaining college months he had on his GI Bill rights and took Spanish courses in Palma de Mallorca, Spain. This is where William Keefe, of the *European Stars and Stripes* newspaper met him. His article<sup>147</sup> started with Jimmy in a Spanish course:

"The rich baritone voice coming from the classroom in back didn't disturb anyone. A German teacher in one room looked at her students and explained, "Es ist Jimmy Davis, der Amerikanische Saenger"<sup>148</sup>". The class went on. The GI Bill students in study period stopped working, briefly. "Lover Man" one said. They were both correct, and while the music lasted everyone enjoyed it. .... when Jimmy (Lover Man) Davis sings during a Spanish class in the Berlitz School in Palma de Mallorca, Spain, they like it. His voice is only part of the reason - a

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<sup>143</sup> Bill Coleman (1989). *Trumpet Story*. Houndmills, Basingstoke and London: The Macmillan Press.

<sup>144</sup> Letter to Hughes, February 2, 1953

<sup>145</sup> Letter to Hughes, August 1, 1953

<sup>146</sup> Letter from Langston Hughes to Jimmy Davis, October 4, 1953

<sup>147</sup> Keefe, William (1954). Jimmy (Lover Man) Davis conquers Spain with songs. *European Stars and Stripes*, May 30.

<sup>148</sup> Written this way in the original.

small part, according to him. Like audiences everywhere, the people at the school like him personally, whether they've seen him once or 150 times."

Keefe continued by stating that Jimmy had nothing but grateful praise for the GI Bill, and that with its help, he had more than made up the three and a half years he lost in the Army during the war.

Of course, Jimmy didn't just attend classes. Here is Keefe again: "Davis has performed in Madrid, Barcelona, and other Spanish cities, has appeared on Radio Palma, singing on programs made up entirely of his own popular songs, and has made the rounds of popular Palma clubs." And he announced that his most recent piece, "Sugar, Sugar Daddy" (also known as "Sugar, Sugar Lady") had been sold to publishers in France, Spain, Germany and the Scandinavian countries.

By the time Langston Hughes caught up with him, a whole year had practically passed. He wrote<sup>149</sup>: "I certainly enjoyed the nice long letter you sent me this week about your journeys in music every-which-a-where, from Paris to Scandinavia to Majorca to Portugal. It is wonderful to hear that you feel you've developed as an entertainer, "artist" no less, and are playing and singing your way around the Continent, and that you might shortly be back in Paris." Jimmy had returned a few months before and he told Langston<sup>150</sup> that he had a new address: 9, rue du Sommerard, Paris 5. This was on the south side of the river Seine, in the Quartier Latin, five minutes away from the Sorbonne on foot.

In that same letter, Jimmy announced a major event in his life as a composer, songwriter and artist: he had recorded his first LP of ten of his own songs, each one sung by him: "Did I tell you that I did my first recording session two months ago? Microsillon of 10 of my songs. I sang them with a 4-piece band behind me. "Lover Man" and a little Spanish number called "Un dia sin tu"<sup>151</sup> were the best of the lot. And, Oh yes, "Blue Valley" turned out rather well also." The band was made up of Aaron Bridgers (piano), Michel de Villers (saxo and clarinet), Bernard Planchenault (drums) and Heinz Grah (bass).

When the record was released by Concerteum (TCV 40; see the cover below), the songs were organized as follows: Side 1: "Lover Man"; "J'ai de la veine"; "Blue Valley"; "C'est beau"; and "Why Is A Good Girl So Hard To Find". Side 2: "Un dia sin ti"; "L'Amour est venu sous mon toit"; "Darlin' You Are So Delicious"; "Un p'tit coup de chapeau"; and "Sugar, Sugar Lady". This is the record that the French National Library digitized and reissued on the internet, song by song. In the Appendix, I have inserted the links next to each song.

When listening to this medley of different genres (ballad, swing, blues, chanson française, cool swing, tango, etc.), in three different languages, one discovers Jimmy's voice, melodious, warm, and teasing at times, as I noted earlier. In the

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<sup>149</sup> Letter from Langston Hughes, July 24, 1954

<sup>150</sup> Letter to Hughes, August 2, 1954

<sup>151</sup> Jimmy wrote "tu" but on the Concerteum record one finds "ti".

document that accompanied the release, it is said that he doesn't sing his songs, he performs them - he feels them, he lives them. It also stated that along with typical American melodies, there were true Parisian tunes such as "J'ai de la veine". In his music, it said, simplicity went hand in hand with good humor, and African American nostalgia, in some songs, was replaced by an urchin-like Parisian optimism, in others.



**Cover of Jimmy's first LP (1954)  
in which he sang ten of his own songs**

The prestigious British magazine, *Gramophone*<sup>152</sup>, was laudatory: "CONCERTEUM have issued a pleasant disc of Jimmy "Lover Man" Davis, the American composer and singer, who sings (mostly blues) in English, French and Spanish. As Davis himself points out, "I'm not much of a singer". Yet, his voice frequently reminds one of Robeson's, and as a composer, he is certainly gifted too." Jimmy shared this with Langston in a letter<sup>153</sup> and quipped, "Not bad for my first recording. The part about Robeson is not true however."

The letters to Langston Hughes, and hence news about Jimmy, suddenly stopped for several years after this last one. It reflected that he was very busy riding the wave of success - composing, performing, preparing new opportunities - in France but also in other European countries. Between 1957 and 1958, six records of Jimmy singing his own French songs were released. One 10" LP, "Je t'aime...Je t'aime" contained the full set with five songs per side. On side A were, "Trop", "Frimousse", "Je t'aime...Je t'aime", "Si j'avais une amie", and "Tout d'une pièce". And on side B, "Je cherche une belle", "C'est beau", "Miami, miam, miam", "Si par bonheur" and "Tango Picasso". Of these songs, only one had appeared in his Concerteum recording a few

<sup>152</sup> *Gramophone*, September, 1954, p. 168

<sup>153</sup> Letter to Hughes, September 21, 1954

years before, "C'est beau". All the others were new. Other records contained from two to four of these songs in 7" singles or extended playing records (see his discography in the Appendix).

What is striking about most of these songs is that Jimmy teamed up with well known French lyricists when composing them. He had already done so with Pierre Delanoë for "C'est beau" a few years before, a real coup as Delanoë was the lyricist for famous artists such as Edith Piaf, Gilbert Bécaud, Juliette Gréco, Nana Mouskouri, and Joe Dassin. For this new set, some of the writers were also of quality. Thus, Pierre Saka, who had written the lyrics for "Si par bonheur", "Trop", and "Frimousse", also wrote for Sylvie Vartan, Eddy Mitchell, Richard Anthony and Annie Cordy. Max François, the lyricist for "Si j'avais une amie", also authored songs for Tino Rossi, Luis Mariano and Bourvil. And Georges Coulonges, the lyricist for "Tout d'une pièce", also wrote for Jean Ferrat, Henri Salvador, and Marcel Amont.

Some ten years after settling down in France, things were finally going well for Jimmy! This is reflected in a December 1957 clipping, probably from *Le Figaro*, which stated that he had become the most Parisian of African American composers and singers. His performances, and his music, were marked by a very personal sense of humor as epitomized by his famous "Tango Picasso", it said. The appreciation people had of him was also illustrated in the blurb that accompanied his 7" EP, "Je cherche une belle". It stated that each of Jimmy "Loverman" Davis' songs is an explosion of charm and kindness. It marveled how Jimmy's contagious smile travelled through the mike, and it encouraged people to see it for themselves: ask your friends for a moment of quiet, put on the record, and then look at their faces!

Clearly, Jimmy was popular and was in high demand. But financially, things didn't seem to follow suit. At the very end of 1957, Jimmy finally recontacted Langston<sup>154</sup> (maybe he had written before but his letters are not at the Beinecke Library) and announced that Ray Anthony, a well-known American bandleader and trumpeter at the time, had just recorded the music of a song of his, "I Fell In Love" on Capitol records, and that his wife, Mamie Van Doren, was singing it. He added, "Maybe now I'll make some money after all these long, lean years!" This was an important event for Jimmy as he was remaking contact with a North American audience. He mentioned this several times in his 1958 letters to Langston, one of which was sent from a new address which was to become his permanent home in Paris: 33bis Avenue Reille, Paris 14 (Building C, first floor; see next chapter). Jimmy added a few months later concerning "I Fell In Love"<sup>155</sup>: "Now if you know of a real "good cultured singer" who could put it on the map... I could soon pay my way back to States for a little trip with the royalties earned!". But Jimmy stayed on in France, performing quite often on the Côte d'Azur (Monte Carlo). Langston passed through Paris on his way to Africa in December 1960, but they seemed to have missed one another. Jimmy told him how sorry he was<sup>156</sup>: "Imagine my chagrin not to see you... I'm praying to see you before too many more Xmas'es have clicked away...".

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<sup>154</sup> New Year's card to Hughes, December 1957

<sup>155</sup> Letter to Hughes, September 9, 1958

<sup>156</sup> Card to Hughes, Christmas 1960

## 8. The next years

This chapter will cover Jimmy's life and activities from 1960 to 1980. As with the preceding chapters, I will base myself on his correspondence with Langston Hughes. Unfortunately, it only lasted until 1967, the year of Langston's demise. After that, newspaper articles, reviews, and personal testimonies will fill the gap, although not as completely.

During these years, Jimmy continued to write and compose songs but he also did a lot of work for the stage and in movies. Thus, in the late 50's and early 60's, he wrote the music for the musical comedy, "Le voleur de blues" (The Blues Thief), and played in it. It was directed by Nicolas Bataille and was presented for the first time in the tiny but famous Théâtre de la Huchette in the Quartier Latin in 1959. It was then played again in the Théâtre de la Comédie de Paris in 1961. That year, a well known daily newspaper, *Combat*, did a review<sup>157</sup> of this parody of the "années folles" (roaring twenties) in Paris, and praised Jimmy's talent, and the tender and nostalgic jazz he had written for it and which he played.

Jimmy performed in other plays such as in Edward Albee's "The Death of Bessie Smith" presented by the Paris Playhouse group in 1963. It wasn't much of a role but Jimmy was nevertheless happy to have it. He told Langston<sup>158</sup>: "We have good critics and hope to run a while (though I've signed for only 4 weeks). ... At the Gala last Wednesday, La Princesse Grace de Monaco, Françoise Sagan, etc. were on hand to give us a send-off (but not increase my little Paris check) ... However I am in on the ground floor and at least am doing something." There is an interesting linguistic anecdote linked to this event. André Calas in the magazine, *Lecture pour tous*<sup>159</sup>, explained that Jimmy's accent in French had become so good that when the American Paris Playhouse director phoned him to offer him a part he said, "But you're not American; you have such a strong French accent!". Jimmy had to explain to him that because of having to speak French so much, he had traces of a foreign accent in English! This is a well known phenomenon in bilinguals when they have much less contact with their native language over an extended period of time<sup>160</sup>. Jimmy continued acting from time to time and in 1975/1976 he played the role of Crooks in John Steinbeck's "Des souris et des hommes" (Of Mice and Men) directed by Robert Hossein. It did well and after having been performed at the Théâtre de Paris, it went on tour in other parts of France.

Jimmy also acted in movies, after having started with "The Respectful Prostitute" in 1952 (see the previous chapter). In 1962, he wrote to Langston<sup>161</sup>: "Providence is good to me! Am in Cannes doing a small role in a film with Jean Gabin, Alain Delon, and Viviane Romance." This was the Henri Verneuil movie, "Mélodie en sous-sol" (Any Number Can Win), a crime drama based on Zekial Marko's novel, *The Big Grab*. Jimmy was supposed to finish filming in early 1963, but most of his scenes

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<sup>157</sup> Dynamisme de la comédie musicale. *Combat*, October 17, 1961.

<sup>158</sup> Letter to Hughes, June 15, 1963

<sup>159</sup> Calas, André (1963). Ils ont choisi Paris. *Lecture pour tous*, 120, December, 47-51.

<sup>160</sup> Grosjean, François (2021). *Life as a Bilingual*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>161</sup> Letter to Hughes, November 8, 1962

were not shot due to a lack of funds<sup>162</sup>. He was pleased to have been part of it, though, and told Langston<sup>163</sup>, "I'm at least seen in one good scene with Alain Delon." Some years later, in 1976, Jimmy also played a small role, that of Moise, in Serge Gainsbourg's movie, "Je t'aime moi non plus" (I Love You, I Don't).

Jimmy talked much less to Langston about his songs in the last letters he wrote to him. From time to time he would send him his new songs with the hope that he could place them in the States. For example<sup>164</sup>, "I'm going to send you 1 or 2 of my songs that I've had recorded here (along with copy of music); listen to them (I have English words for them) and maybe (who knows?) you might know of a singer who could record them there!". A year and a half later, he wrote<sup>165</sup>: "Will send you under separate cover the record, "Why Is A Good Man So Hard To Find" (for Nina Simone). Please thank her for doing "Lover Man". I do not have the record but hear it is very good." And a bit later he told him<sup>166</sup>: "Today a young girl French singer auditioned for Polydor records with four of my songs. They liked her very much so if they signed her up, I'm in!". Jimmy never talked about her again, so we don't know if it worked out or not. Another hope that didn't seem to have materialized was Jimmy's "Ting-A-Ling". He wrote<sup>167</sup>: "Ran into Rex Stewart (former trumpeter with Duke Ellington) in Saint Germain des Près. I hadn't seen him in 17 years when he introduced my hit song, "J'ai de la Veine".... Anyway, he is supposed to record my song, "Ting-A-Ling" this week with Vogue recordings. He thinks it's an international hit. Hope he's right!". There is no trace of him doing it, unfortunately. And in 1967, after a trip to London, he said that maybe Lena Horne would sing it, but she doesn't seem to have done so.

In his last letter to Langston, on March 26, 1967, Jimmy admitted that things were really difficult in the world of songs which had changed so much since he began back in the early 40's. He wrote<sup>168</sup>: ".. I'm again trying to get a recording of my songs (which is so difficult). Everyone says, 'You are a great composer' (but I can't sell one song!!). But that is my business and I've decided to stick to it (go down with the ship, you might say!)." His idea of coming back to the US to activate sales there cropped up regularly in his letters. In 1963, he wrote to Langston<sup>169</sup>: "I told you already I want to come back next year for 3-4 months to see my mother, and I'm now preparing 3-4 songs that I'll be able to exploit when I get back there. I know it's difficult there but it's my only chance." Two years later he wrote<sup>170</sup>: "I am still on my ass with no way out it seems... unless I come back to States and try placing my songs there. Here it is impossible now!". Langston did not encourage him to return though, worrying about his safety. In a letter, a few months before, he had written<sup>171</sup>, "At least 4 folks I know have been robbed or mugged in the last two weeks. N.Y. is getting BAD. My advice,

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<sup>162</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 15, 1963

<sup>163</sup> Letter to Hughes, April 6, 1963

<sup>164</sup> Letter to Hughes, February 14, 1963

<sup>165</sup> Letter to Hughes, November 18, 1964

<sup>166</sup> Letter to Hughes, March, 1966

<sup>167</sup> Letter to Hughes, September 21, 1966

<sup>168</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 26, 1967

<sup>169</sup> Letter to Hughes, February 14, 1963

<sup>170</sup> Letter to Hughes, December 14, 1965

<sup>171</sup> Letter from Langston Hughes to Jimmy Davis, October 9, 1965

STAY in Paris....". In the end, Jimmy kept pushing back his return, and only went over in 1981, as we will see below.

New songs were giving him problems but so were old ones, most notably his biggest hit, "Lover Man". Val Wilmer wrote in 1975<sup>172</sup>: "Ironically, the song that has provided him with enough money to live on - over 500 artists have recorded it - as well as opening doors everywhere Davis goes, is a constant source of frustration for him and co-composer, Ram Ramirez.... Despite the law that after 28 years in copyright the ownership of song material reverts to the authors, the publishers of "Lover Man", MCA, refuse to fulfill their obligations." In a letter to me 40 years later<sup>173</sup>, she stated that Jimmy visited New York in the 1980's and was able to secure some additional rights for himself and Ramirez. I found a short clip in the *Spartanburg Herald*, in 1981, which confirms this<sup>174</sup>: "Jimmy Davis, songwriter retired now in France, returned to battle for his song, "Lover Man", a long run torch song...". Val Wilmer concluded in the same letter that, finally, it was not until very late that either of them received anything worthwhile despite the fame of their song. She ended, "Having said that, I don't remember Jimmy being bitter."

In the 60's and up until Langston's death, Jimmy and Langston wrote to one another much more than they had done in the 1950's. One reason is that Langston's shows, such as "Black Nativity" and "The Prodigal Son," were being performed in Paris and were having great success. Langston would ask Jimmy to attend and send him the public's reaction, newspaper reviews, as well as copies of the programs that were being sold. Langston even organized for him to be there on the opening night of "Black Nativity" at the Champs Elysées on January 3rd, 1963. Jimmy did so and wrote the next day<sup>175</sup>:

"Congratulations! What a big success you have on your hands!! The Direction gave me 2 wonderful seats in 3rd row Orchestra. I managed to get dressed up in a tux accompanied by a beautiful sirène in an evening dress (very lovely). I can tell you that 1st night public is usually spoiled and is hard on plays here, but from the beginning, I knew that you had won! The public clapped hands as I've never seen them do before (I being one of the biggest clappers).... I personally got the biggest kick out of it as I've never heard anything like it in years (back in America in some churches)."

As for "The Prodigal Son", Langston wrote to Jimmy to invite him to go see it with him in Paris in 1965<sup>176</sup>: "If you are not otherwise engaged, how about seeing it with me on New Year's Eve and afterwards going to Haynes or the Living Room or somewhere for supper, and ringing out the old, ring in the new together?" This is

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<sup>172</sup> Wilmer, Valerie (1975b). Jimmy 'Lover Man' Davis talks to Valerie Wilmer. *Swing Journal*, May 26, 1975.

<sup>173</sup> Letter from Val Wilmer, January 2, 2015

<sup>174</sup> *The Spartanburg Herald*, August 15, 1981

<sup>175</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 4, 1963

<sup>176</sup> Letter from Hughes to Jimmy Davis, December 23, 1965

exactly what happened according to Rampersad (2002; p. 396)<sup>177</sup>. It was the last time they were to see one another.

Another important reason for more letters is that Jimmy needed some financial support as he had decided to buy the apartment he was renting at 33bis Avenue Reille. He sprung the following on Langston in February, 1962<sup>178</sup>: "Now Lang, brace yourself! I'm going to shock you. Can you possibly lend me \$750 immediately? (Wow! What a question). The owner of my apartment has suddenly decided to put it up for sale. He is asking just double this price and wants it cash on the line. It is too good a bargain, Langston, for me not to try my best to get it. (My housing problem will be solved for life, as after I own it, it will cost me no more than \$40 a year taxes, etc.)." Lang had to reply that he didn't have that kind of money, but did so with tact and humor<sup>179</sup>: "You must be out of your mind! I have not seen \$750 whole and entire and all at once for I don't know when. And what little money I had I spent on the African trip, besides cabling my publishers for the advance on my next book. ... I certainly wish I could help, as the apartment deal is one I hope you won't have to pass up. Maybe my sweepstake ticket will hit! In which case I'll be back in Paris myself."

Jimmy reassured Lang that he would manage<sup>180</sup>: "Friends are helping me with the apartment and if I can get \$300 more by the 5th of April, the apt will say, 'Daddy Jimmy, I love you, and I am yours'." But Langston, being such a good friend, kept worrying Jimmy wouldn't get it and wrote almost a year later<sup>181</sup>: "Did you ever get your apartment financed? Or income tax paid? How much do you still need for the apartment, as it would be a shame to lose out on that? ...I could send you a hundred or so if it would be of any help. Maybe a bit more later. At any rate, try to hang on to the apartment -- so you'll always have some place to hang your hat over there. Lemme know." The final sale had to wait until all the money was there, though, and Jimmy had to come back to Langston a year later<sup>182</sup> : "Two weeks ago, the former owner of my apt. gave me a last delay to pay the \$200 that I owe him (until Feb 1st). My telephone will be cut off if I don't pay...". In the end, Langston came through, as he often had before<sup>183</sup>: "Things are looking up a bit now. The Black Nativity people have begun to pay off their debt... and both companies are still running abroad. So let me know how things stand with your apartment. And what do you need to hold on to it? Perhaps I can help some...". He sent Jimmy \$222, and finally, a month later, Jimmy wrote<sup>184</sup>: " Man, Whoof!!... am so thankful that I can hold on to my apartment because without a place to stay and work it would be hell in Paris. Thanks again!". A few days later Langston told him he was glad he was saved by the bell and wouldn't be homeless or houseless!

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<sup>177</sup> Rampersad, Arnold (2002). *The Life of Langston Hughes: Volume II: 1941-1967, I Dream a World* (Life of Langston Hughes, 1941-1967) (pp. 52-53). Oxford University Press. Kindle Edition

<sup>178</sup> Letter to Hughes, February 13, 1962

<sup>179</sup> Letter from Langston Hughes to Jimmy, February 17, 1962

<sup>180</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 25, 1962

<sup>181</sup> Letter from Langston Hughes to Jimmy, February 6, 1963

<sup>182</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 18, 1964

<sup>183</sup> Letter from Langston Hughes to Jimmy, January 14, 1965

<sup>184</sup> Letter to Hughes, February 4, 1965

In these last letters to Langston, a recurring theme was how difficult things were for Jimmy. We saw signs of this with his acting career, his difficulties getting his songs performed and recorded, and his efforts to get the money to buy his apartment. He knew he could be frank with Langston and he didn't hesitate. Here are a few samples of what he wrote: "Hope something else turns up soon because I'm so, so tired of just hanging on!"<sup>185</sup>; "For days, I've been eating rice, losing weight, morale, etc. because this has been really the hardest stretch since I've been in Paris! Bills! Bills, and more bills."<sup>186</sup>; "They came and got my piano Saturday (but a friend has promised to lend me his electric organ) so I'm still living on borrowed time - but that's my destiny until that great getting-up morning."<sup>187</sup>; "Don't know what's going to happen to me in my work; can't seem to get out of the hole!"<sup>188</sup>; "... am still struggling to live and even more so than before. Debts, food, etc. Only it's worse as I have absolutely no desire to fight. It's like a spell has been cast over me forbidding me to raise a hand to help myself (it's awful!)"<sup>189</sup>

One poignant example of Jimmy's difficulties occurred in early January, 1965. Langston<sup>190</sup> sent him \$5 to "go see Nativity and get me a couple of programs and a souvenir booklet, please, and post to me." Jimmy was in dire straights at the time and this is what he said he did<sup>191</sup>: "Rec'd the \$5 - but I went out and bought a big steak, cooked it, ate it, and felt much better. Then went to see "Black Nativity" but I only had enough money left to buy 1 programme (they cost a little over \$1)." Later that same year, he told Langston<sup>192</sup>: "I am flat on my ass - borrowing metro tickets, eating with friends, and the same old shit when one is forever broke. ... A girl friend gave me 5 Xmas cards free (but I actually don't have stamps to mail 5 cards to USA Air-Mail)." Langston had sent him a postal order just before but unfortunately it got lost and only arrived three months later! Jimmy was getting desperate<sup>193</sup>: "I've borrowed from different sources (\$150) with guarantee that when money comes, I'd pay it back. ... I go down to letter box every day with the hope it has arrived (and this since December 10)." The money finally did come and Jimmy was overjoyed<sup>194</sup>: "Imagine my surprise when the postmaster knocked and paid me on the spot 242 F (\$50). He explained that it was sent to 13 ave. Reille (he couldn't explain why it took over three months to get to me!). Anyway it's all gone now (bills! bills! bills!) but it sure felt good while it lasted. Thanks a million, Lang!"

The peak of Jimmy's difficulties came at the beginning of 1967, when he wrote to Langston that he had to take a temporary job taking care of a household in Versailles. He would start work at eight in the morning, and often finish late at night. The pay wasn't much but he would have room and board, and would return to his

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<sup>185</sup> Letter to Hughes, April 6, 1963

<sup>186</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 18, 1964

<sup>187</sup> Letter to Hughes, November 18, 1964

<sup>188</sup> Letter to Hughes, February 4, 1965

<sup>189</sup> Letter to Hughes, October 30, 1965

<sup>190</sup> Letter from Langston Hughes to Jimmy, January 20, 1965

<sup>191</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 31, 1965

<sup>192</sup> Letter to Hughes, December 14, 1965

<sup>193</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 10, 1966

<sup>194</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 18, 1966

apartment on weekends. He told Langston<sup>195</sup>, "Hope I can stick it out until I get some of these bills out of the way -- and until one of my songs catches on. But hell, that's life." But he only managed to endure it for a few months<sup>196</sup>: "... needless to say it was too much for me (I'm not 20 any more)". This was his last letter to Langston, his confidant of more than 25 years. Langston Hughes underwent abdominal surgery in New York City a few months later, but there were post operation complications and he died on May 22, 1967. It must have come as a terrible shock to Jimmy to learn about it. Ever since 1942, he knew he had a special friend on whom he could count and with whom he could share his joys and sorrows. As he wrote to him a few years before<sup>197</sup>: "...in my life now I want only true friends and you are one of them. Maybe I'm not worthy of your friendship.... But I try. I kiss you as a brother."

It is difficult to know how he managed to regain control of things in Paris but what is sure is that he had many friends there on whom he could count to see him through. He often talked about them in his letters to Langston, as we have seen already. Here are two other examples. In September 1962, he wrote<sup>198</sup>: "Just back from a wonderful free vacation (one month). I have a friend and her family, who own a summer house in the middle of France, invited me for August. Now I'm back in Paris with all these bills piling up (the papers just came thru for the sale of my apt and you know what that means) but I'm in good health after a month of repos in the sun, swimming everyday, and I'm not going to let it get me down!" (This must have been at Jacqueline's country house in the Puy-de-Dôme department). And in 1965, he said: "My situation is hardly better than before but friends have been so understanding and so I see a ray of light at the end of the tunnel!"<sup>199</sup>



**Jimmy Davis in 1974  
(Courtesy Robert Landau)**

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<sup>195</sup> Letter to Hughes, January 27, 1967

<sup>196</sup> Letter to Hughes, March 26, 1967

<sup>197</sup> Letter to Hughes, May, 1964

<sup>198</sup> Letter to Hughes, September 11, 1962

<sup>199</sup> Letter to Hughes, April 1, 1965

By the time Val Wilmer met him in 1975, she was able to write<sup>200</sup>, "Today, Jimmy Davis is alive and well and living in Paris where he divides his time between acting on stage and screen, and continuing to write songs." Above is a photo of Jimmy by the renowned photographer, Robert Landau, taken at about this time. In a letter that Val Wilmer wrote to me in 2015<sup>201</sup>, she said that she went back to see Jimmy at least six times after that article, in the 70's and 80's, and took other friends along with her. She'd bring a bottle of wine and some flowers, and he'd produce a simple three-course meal that always tasted great. He was an excellent cook, she stated, and they always had some good times together. She added that he had little money, that he seldom worked, and that he had to rely on the tiny royalties that he received from his songs to get by.

As we saw earlier, Jimmy had finally gone to the United States in 1981 to find a solution concerning the rights to "Lover Man", and the increase he obtained must have helped him the remainder of his life. Jimmy used that trip to visit his mother who had become very frail. He had often talked about going back over the years, but had never done so. Jacqueline Baraduc told me how it happened. Jimmy was so hesitant about a trip such as this one that his friends, and notably Jacqueline, had to encourage him to take it. When the day arrived, Jacqueline realized that he might cancel it at the last minute and so she took a day off from work to accompany him to the airport. When he reached the elevated passageway, he stopped and said he couldn't go any further. Jacqueline spent several minutes talking to him and encouraging him to go. He finally went, and he did spend some time with his mother in Washington D.C. Jacqueline Baraduc showed me a lovely photo of the two with the US Capitol in the background. Thirty eight years before, practically to the day, Jimmy's Army band had played on its steps a few weeks before his Warrant Officer graduation ceremony.

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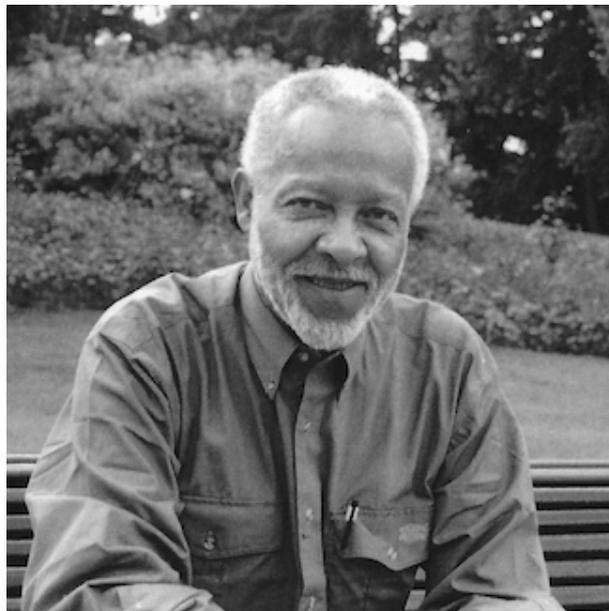
<sup>200</sup> Wilmer, Valerie (1975b). Jimmy 'Lover Man' Davis talks to Valerie Wilmer. *Swing Journal*, May 26, 1975.

<sup>201</sup> Letter from Val Wilmer, January 2, 2015

## 9. The last years

One could have thought that Jimmy's trip to America might have encouraged him to retire back there, but by this time he was definitely anchored to France. Jimmy had fully integrated into the culture after his return in 1947, as is evidenced in various documents that are available. Thus, the music publisher's description that accompanied his 1954 Concerteum record stated that his French songs expressed the spirit of France and of Paris completely. It cited *Paris Match* that he was the most Parisian of African American singers, but with his very own personality. In the 1963 *Lecture pour tous* article I have already mentioned<sup>202</sup>, he was asked if he had fully assimilated into French life. He answered that he had, adding that he even forgot about Thanksgiving Day. American friends had to phone him to ask him if he was coming over to eat the traditional turkey with them! Asked if it was more difficult for an American musician to work in Paris than in the United States, he replied categorically that it wasn't. French law are very liberal and all he needed was a work permit. It would be harder for a French musician in the US. He quipped that he loved everything in France except for the way the tax system worked... which he found incomprehensible!

Unlike his good friend, Aaron Bridgers, who became a French citizen, Jimmy remained an expatriate, and never renounced his American citizenship. But he was forever grateful for the way he had been welcomed, and accepted, in his second country. Maryvonne Dufour, his friend and neighbor of many years, told me what he would often state: "I came to France with nothing, I was welcomed with open arms, and I will leave with nothing." And Jacqueline Baraduc recalls him saying, "France gave me everything; I owe it everything."



**Jimmy Davis in 1990  
(Courtesy Jacqueline Baraduc)**

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<sup>202</sup> Calas, André (1963). Ils ont choisi Paris. *Lecture pour tous*, 120, December, 47-51.

At some point - I don't have the date - Jimmy stopped working and retired. Michel Fabre stated in 1991<sup>203</sup>: "A friendly, soft-spoken person, he manages to live happily on little in his small apartment on the Avenue Reille....". When I interacted with his old friend, Clovis Depretz (Don Clovis), he told me that in their last telephone conversation in the mid-eighties, Jimmy had problems with his eyes. Jacqueline Baraduc confirmed his health problems at the time but she talked of muscular issues and the onset of leukemia. He had slowed down considerably and it was an effort for him to do simple things. Maryvonne Dufour and her family would often invite him for a drink or a meal, along with other tenants on the "escalier C" of the building, and Jimmy would arrive in good spirits despite his health problems. Otherwise, they would hear him play the piano upstairs, and his laughter would often ring out when he was on the phone.

In his last years, a group of friends, among them Jacqueline Baraduc and Yvonne Gauqué, would take turns looking after him. Since he wasn't French, he couldn't get his meals from the Mairie, so his friends brought him what he needed and took care of his laundry. He became absent minded with time, and at some point, Jacqueline and Yvonne became his official guardians. Then, when he really couldn't stay in his own apartment anymore, he moved to a retirement home - the Maison de Retraite Protestante de la Muette (Paris 12) - where he stayed for two years. In 1997, he celebrated his 82nd birthday there, and photos shared by Jacqueline showed him smiling and surrounded by many of his friends who had come to wish him Happy Birthday. Since the building he lived in started to be renovated, he moved down the road to the Maison de Retraite et de Gériatrie de la Fondation de Rothschild, 76, rue Picpus, Paris 12. It is there that he passed away a few months later, on October 21, 1997.

Jacqueline had come up from her home in the Puy-de-Dôme that day to visit him and had passed by his apartment to get some things. She had been told the day before that he was very tired and had difficulties breathing, but she did not think the end was so near. She arrived in his apartment and found that there had been a large water leak from the apartment upstairs, and that all his photos and paintings on the wall had been damaged. She had a strange feeling seeing this and so she phoned the retirement home and was told that he had passed away. She rushed to his bedside and stayed with him: he was very beautiful and serene on his death bed, she told me.

The funeral ceremony took place at the American Church in Paris and was organized by his long-time friend, Aaron Bridgers. His nieces attended as did many friends. The ceremony was officiated by pastor David J. Wood, and was assisted by Guy de Fato, it would seem, the chaplain of the French jazz community. As Jimmy lay in his coffin, French saxophonist, Claude Tissendier, played "Lover Man" - "wonderfully" observed Aaron Bridgers later - and Peter Bannister accompanied him on the piano. Then Jay Gottlieb played some Gershwin solo on the piano. David

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<sup>203</sup> Fabre, Michel (1991). *From Harlem to Paris: Black American Writers in France, 1840-1980*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Wood (2012) described the ceremony in some detail fifteen years later, when discoursing on the the role and work of the pastor, somewhat analogous to the conductor of an orchestra<sup>204</sup>. I found it quite by chance and reproduce a segment of it as it is very touching:

"Several years ago I had the opportunity to serve as the associate pastor of the American Church in Paris. On one occasion, a request came to the church office for a pastor to officiate at a funeral to be held in our sanctuary. ... It turned out that the deceased was a man named Jimmy Davis. I soon learned that Jimmy Davis was an African-American expatriate who had been living in Paris since the 1940's. He was best known for his composition, "Lover Man" which became one of Billie Holiday's greatest hits. A day or so before the funeral, his family along with several friends from the jazz community, visited with me to plan the service. In the course of our conversation they asked if a particular French priest—an unofficial chaplain to the jazz community—could assist me in the leadership of the service. I readily consented.

The day of the funeral came and about one hundred people gathered in the sanctuary. After the coffin was reverently carried down the center aisle to a Billie Holiday recording of "Lover Man," I offered words of consolation and then invited my co-officiant to share a few words. He took his position—not at the lectern where I had stood, but at the foot of the chancel stairs, at the head of the simple, unfinished pine coffin. Placing his hands gently on the surface of the coffin, he began speaking his remembrances. In English, then in French—back and forth. The mourners were clearly with him. Then he did something I will never forget. In the midst of his eulogy, he broke into scat. He resumed talking and then jumped off again into scat. He riffed back and forth for the next fifteen minutes. It was a riveting improvisational performance of a life and of grief and of hope."

Jimmy was cremated and his ashes were brought to Jacqueline Baraduc's family tomb (Baraduc-Laudouze) at the Mont-Dore cemetery (Puy-de-Dôme) where they rest. A memorial plaque, composed by Jacqueline, intertwining French and English, rests on the tomb (see below).



"You, our friend  
Jimmy DAVIS  
will remain forever  
our 'Lover Man',  
because it was so."

<sup>204</sup> <https://www.xpastor.org/strategy/pastoral-care/jazz-improvisation-the-peculiar-work-of-pastors/>

## 10. A man loved by so many

We cannot end Jimmy Davis' story without spending some time on the person that he was and the love he inspired all around him. This has come through repeatedly in his story, but it is good to expound on it further. Jimmy had that kind of warm and outgoing personality that attract people from all horizons. Some of his friends were very famous and their names have appeared in what precedes: Langston Hughes, Billie Holiday, Roger "Ram" Ramirez, Aaron Bridgers, Boris Vian, Bill Coleman, Rex Stewart, Joséphine Baker, Aimé Barelli, Marcel Marceau, Richard Wright, Inez Cavanaugh, Maurice Chevalier, Val Wilmer, Yves Montand, etc. He knew many other outstanding people and some are listed in a footnote<sup>205</sup>. Reporters and authors also talked favorably about him. For example, and as we saw in Chapter 7, Keefe (1954) stated that like audiences everywhere, the people at his language school in Mallorca liked him personally, whether they'd seen him once or 150 times. And as we saw earlier, Fabre (1991) spoke of a friendly and soft-spoken person.

More than fifteen years after his death, I managed to contact a few people who had known him personally, and a few others contacted me after reading my articles in *The Guardian*<sup>206</sup> and in the French *HuffPost*<sup>207</sup>. They kindly accepted to tell me about him and I am most grateful to them. Val Wilmer, whom we have mentioned several times in this book, wrote in a letter<sup>208</sup> that Jimmy, "neat and always well-dressed", did not say negative things about other people and was not bitter. He was a kind-hearted, "lovely, warm and gentle individual who appeared to be universally liked" - in a word, a gentleman.

Jacinto Luis, a Portuguese painter, knew Jimmy for about thirty years at the end of the last century. According to him, he was an extraordinary person, very sensitive and kind, but also very humble. He lived on the verge of poverty despite his talent, and this was due in part, according to him, to the fact that he was not business oriented. Some of his "friends" abandoned him because of this. Jacinto Luis published a catalog of his paintings in 1989 which he dedicated in this way to Jimmy: "Pour Jimmy mon grand ami; je t'embrasse bien fort, tendrement et avec toute l'affection du monde. Jacinto."<sup>209</sup> A portrait of Jimmy by Jacinto Luis is presented below.

Clovis Depretz (Don Clovis), who had started off his career as the singer, Johnny Fisher, in the 1960's, and who had known Jimmy for many years, both in France and then in The Netherlands, told me that Jimmy was a musician of class, a great pianist, with a great heart. Jay Gottlieb, concert pianist who has premiered over 100

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<sup>205</sup> Other famous people who were Jimmy's friends: Sidney Bechet, Art Simmons, Juliette Gréco, James Baldwin, Jean-Paul Belmondo, Bourvil, and Edith Piaf.

<sup>206</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/dec/06/the-american-jazz-musician-who-saved-my-life>

<sup>207</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/francois-grosjean/a-la-recherche-de-jimmy-davis-le-musicien-de-jazz-qui-ma-sauve-la-vie\\_b\\_6366896.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/francois-grosjean/a-la-recherche-de-jimmy-davis-le-musicien-de-jazz-qui-ma-sauve-la-vie_b_6366896.html)

<sup>208</sup> Letter from Val Wilmer, January 2, 2015

<sup>209</sup> An approximative translation would be: "To Jimmy, my great friend; with strong and tender hugs, and all the affection in the world. Jacinto".



**Portrait of Jimmy Davis by Jacinto Luis (c. 1976)**

works, as well as teacher and author, met Jimmy in Paris in 1978 via Jacqueline Baraduc. He wrote that he and Jimmy adored each other and added: "Impossible not to adore him--pure delight in every way." A Danish couple, Ole and Lisbeth Bom, also knew Jimmy for many years as Ole had met him in 1959 when he was a student at the Cité Universitaire in Paris, quite close to Avenue Reille. They would regularly see Jimmy with their children, either in Paris or in Copenhagen, and Ole reported that they had tears in their eyes in 1996 when they kissed goodbye. They somehow knew that this was the last time they would see him.

Josiane Martinez-Simon contacted me spontaneously to tell me that she and her husband were friends of Jimmy in the late 50's and early 60's. Her Spanish husband was a guitarist who often played duo with Jimmy at his piano. The two would also go fishing together in Sarron, north of Paris, in the Oise Department. Her son became a professional jazz guitarist later and it was in large part due to Jimmy's influence. His kindness warmed all of their hearts.

Jacqueline Baraduc, to whom this book is dedicated primarily, kindly talked to me in 2014 about Jimmy. Theirs was a deep friendship that lasted practically fifty years until Jimmy's demise. She considered him as one would a big brother, even a father. He would often come to her family's home in the Puy-de-Dôme region and was practically a member of their family, adopted by all. For Jacqueline, Jimmy was a great humanitarian, but also a mysterious man, unfathomable for those who knew him well. He had an extremely attaching personality, rigid on certain things but easy going on others, and he was liked by everyone. He felt at ease in different environments and made others feel the same. Jimmy was modest and remained very discreet about his life. He was superstitious, almost mystical, and had bouts of anxiety. But he radiated elegance and warmth in his way of dealing with people and with life.



**Jimmy with Jacqueline Baraduc, 1977  
(Courtesy Jacqueline Baraduc)**

The real character of a person often comes out when they interact with young people. I will relate here the testimony of three people who had known him and shared moments with him in their younger years. Rory Edge told me he was touring around Europe in his youth and dropped by to see Jimmy in Paris. A common friend had told Rory to look Jimmy up and so he phoned him, and Jimmy was immediately welcoming and invited him to his home. Rory recalls Jimmy's apartment as being comfortable, neither modest nor fancy. The most noticeable piece of furniture was the upright piano. Jimmy asked him how long he had been in Europe and after having talked about the cuisine they had both enjoyed in different countries, Jimmy said, "So after six weeks in Europe, how do you feel about hamburger patties and peas?" Rory replied that it would be great and Jimmy cooked and served them accompanied by a simple but very good wine.

Another young person to whom Jimmy was welcoming was Robert Landau, a professional photographer. He was in his 20s at the time, and had been introduced to Jimmy by Jacqueline. The two shared several dinners together, and Robert found him to be a kind and elegant man, very modest, who never spoke about himself or put on airs. Jimmy knew that Robert was an aspiring photographer and as a gesture of encouragement, he mentioned that he could use a new portrait for his work. So Robert met him in a park in Paris and took some black and white pictures with natural light. He developed his film at the American Center which had a darkroom and gave the pictures to Jimmy. One of them is presented in Chapter 6.

The final testimony comes from Claude Bamas who had lived with his mother and sister in the apartment above Jimmy's on Avenue Reille until the late sixties. Jimmy was loved by all his neighbors and was always ready to help others out, or find out how somebody was. As an adolescent, Claude would often go down to see Jimmy, talk to him, and listen to jazz records with him, just as one would with a big brother. He remembers that the corridor in Jimmy's apartment was covered with dozens of photos linked to Jimmy's activities. And from time to time, Jimmy would sit at the piano and sing some of his new French songs to him. When he was a bit older,

Claude would accompany him to a few jazz clubs. As the years went by, Claude's appreciation of Jimmy's kindness and open mindedness, not to mention his infectious laughter, grew no bounds. Later, when Claude was dating his future wife, he would go to Jimmy's apartment to phone her as he didn't have a phone in his own lodging. Jimmy was a witness at their wedding, and when Claude and his wife had children, Jimmy was there for family gatherings and birthdays. Claude ends his testimony by stressing how deep the ties were between them. It was with great sadness that he attended Jimmy's funeral to say goodbye to his friend of many years.

And so ends the story of Jimmy Davis, a truly wonderful person who is missed by all those who knew him ... and also, rightfully so, by many who didn't. May you rest in peace, Jimmy!

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## Appendix. Jimmy Davis' songs, discography, and music

### Songs

- Madame Isabelle Fauvel at the Sacem told me in 2014 that Jimmy Davis was the lyricist or composer of some **130 songs**. She did not give me a list of them, however.
- Below is a tentative list compiled from various other lists some of which were given to me (e.g. by Jacqueline Baraduc, Paul Kaufman, and Félix Sportis). This compilation still has to be finalized.
- The titles are organized alphabetically, irrespective of language.
- When other people were involved, their names are preceded with "w." (with). No effort is made to indicate who the composer(s) and the lyricist (s) were, as the information is not easily available, and quite often the roles were shared.
- When there is a version of a song in another language, its title is indicated in parentheses, preceded by F (for French), E (for English) and S (for Spanish). It can also be found in its alphabetical slot in the list. People involved with the other language version, but not with the original version, are only listed with that other version.
- On the right are links to the songs available on YouTube. When Jimmy Davis is singing, we have given him the priority.
- Songs for which we found no clear evidence that Jimmy Davis was involved are left out of the list.

A Dieu, à diable

A la tienne  
w. Korb Nathan

A Low-Down, Dirty Shame  
(F: Ce soir sans toi)

A quoi bon  
(E: Specially When I'm In A Lovin' Mood)

Amour est venu sous mon toit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-7HJ4x3kNTQ>  
w. Henri Lemarchand  
(E: Guess I Got The Blues)

Au bal de tes yeux  
(E: Rock Me More And More)

Bettina

Blue Valley <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4GiYyMZ75t8&t=68s>  
w. E. D. Russell Daville

Bury Me Beneath The Willow

But Why (Did You Smile)  
(F: Indéfiniment, inlassablement)

But You Love Him Just the Same  
(F: Tu l'aimeras toujours)

Cailloux  
w. Simone Gaffie, Raymond Lavigne

'Cause I'm Me / 'Cause I'm Black  
(F: La putain respectueuse)

Ce soir sans toi  
(E: A Low-Down, Dirty Shame)

C'est beau  
w. Pierre Delanoë

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cewgA54HWto>

C'était toi, c'était moi

Children Of Every Race  
(F: Enfants de tous pays)

Crépuscule  
w. Roger "Ram" Ramirez, (Jimmy Sherman),  
and Marc Lanjean (French lyrics)  
(E: Lover Man)

Curb Your Dog

Darling, You're So Delicious  
w. Walter Bishop  
(F: Miam, miam, miam)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGKLaIF\\_Rik](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oGKLaIF_Rik)

Dear Portugal  
(F: Oublie et viens)

S: De una vez  
w. Georges Coulonges, Amoros Francisco  
Ribe  
(F: Tout d'une pièce)

Diggin' The Dictionary  
w. Jerry Horne

Do I Miss You, Yes I Do  
w. Van Sco(u)yk

Donnez-moi un seul baiser  
(E: Please Give Me)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sW4MqNXiYLg>

Down, Down And Round, Round (With You I  
Was Lost)  
(F: Je sais qu'ils s'aiment)

Enfants de tous pays  
(E: Children Of Every Race)

Family Of The Underground  
w. Everette, Jacobs, Jenkins, Miller, Tabor,  
Spiller, Stretch, Waters, Williams

Forget It, I Still Love You  
w. Jimmy Young  
(F: J'ai confiance)

Frimousse  
w. Pierre Saka, Domenico Modugno

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eq3FYvMSvqo>

Good Night, My Love

Guess I Got The Blues  
(F: Amour est venu sous mon toit)

Hush Up, I Still Love You

I Fell In Love  
(F: Si par bonheur)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v7Qbap45L1Q>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ygH6d5vIGwA>

I'll Believe The Gypsy  
(F: Viens chez moi)

I'm The Luckiest Fool In The  
World  
(F: J'ai de la veine)

Indéfiniment, inlassablement  
(E: But Why (Did You Smile))

I Was A Fool

J'ai confiance  
(E: Forget It, I Still Love You)

J'ai de la veine  
w. Max François, (Fred Miguel Raio de  
San Lazaro?)  
(E: I'm The Luckiest Fool In The  
World)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vptvJKHzMPQ>

J'ai le blues dans la peau  
w. Maire Allevy

Je cherche une belle  
w. Henri Kubnick, Lee David

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rKHOCi2avxQ>

Je sais qu'ils s'aiment  
(E: Down, Down And Round, Round  
(With You I Was Lost))

Je n'aime que vous

Je t'aime, je t'aime  
w. Louis Amade, Cy Coben  
(E: Straws In The Wind)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X9KMeBC0Qio>

L' Africain  
w. Alain Felix Louis Saury

La putain respectueuse  
E: 'Cause I'm Me / 'Cause I'm Black)

L' Amour est venu sous mon toit  
(see Amour est venu sous mon toit)

Leave Me In Peace

Le chemin des quatre saisons

Le petit Boléro

Les rues de ma ville

L'esclave

Let's Knock Ourselves Out  
w. Juan Tizol

Les vacances

Le voleur de blues

Lèvres

L'oiseau

Looking For My Man  
w. Sylvia Desayles

Lover Man / Lover Girl  
w. Roger (Ram) Ramirez; (James Sherman)  
(F: Crépuscule)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w7BXXhKcDZc>  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iBanjMmV6zQ>

Lune de miel

Maître à danser

Marie-Caline

Même si  
(E: Why Is A Good Man So Hard To Find?)

Miam, miam, miam  
w. Henri Lemarchand  
(E: Darling, You're So Delicious)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7cMHM3IPeg>

Moments With You  
w. Tommy Pendle

Oh baby  
w. Jack Hoffman  
(E: The Blues Jumped Up And Got Me)

On ne sait jamais si l'amour viendra  
w. Jean Moulard  
(E: Strutt, Baby, Strutt)

Oochie Coochie  
w. Anderson Rick, Bivins Michael, Wales  
Kevin, Young James Oliver

Oublie demain

Oublie et viens  
(E: Dear Portugal)

Oui, je crois à la paix  
w. Maurice Boubert

Please Give Me  
(F: Donnez-moi un seul baiser)

Promise You'll Stay  
w. Jeffrey L. Osborne

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZzSorMv1wY>

Regardez ces gens-là  
w. Simone Gaffie

Rock Me More And More  
w. Lachani Hulshoff, Simone Gaffie  
(F: Au bal de tes yeux)

Shake Shake Baby  
(Shake It Good)  
w. Simone Gaffie

Si j'avais une amie  
w. Max François  
(E: Sugar, Sugar Lady / Daddy)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BY7wDY6Hs7E>

Si par bonheur  
w. Pierre Saka  
(E: I Fell In Love)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iW9tCR\\_WVJs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iW9tCR_WVJs)

Si tu voulais chéri  
(E: You're The Greatest Love)

Si toute la folie de toi

Something's Wrong Somewhere

Specially When I'm In A Lovin' Mood  
(F: A quoi bon)

Straws In The Wind  
(F: Je t'aime, je t'aime)

Sugar, Sugar Lady / Daddy  
(F: Si j'avais une amie)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cLWBNzFi6EI>

Sweet Senorita

Strutt, Baby, Strutt  
(F: On ne sait jamais si l'amour viendra)

Tango Picasso  
w. A. Viala, Nicolas Bataille

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WHZqVldPP8>

That Man of Mine

The Blues Jumped Up And Got Me w. Jack Hoffman (F: Oh baby)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdX9FFm9HXA">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdX9FFm9HXA</a>
Ting-A-Ling	
Tonight's My Night? w. Allen Julian Orange, Robert S. Wilson	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQvO4Qb23I8">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZQvO4Qb23I8</a>
Tu l'aimeras toujours (E: But You Love Him Just The Same)	
Tout d'une pièce w. Georges Coulonges S: De una vez	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZH72o2sbQU">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nZH72o2sbQU</a>
Tout le long	
Tout va la cruche à l'eau	
Trinque, Trinque w. Francis Lemarque (Nathan Korb)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLcutHaTQyQ">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FLcutHaTQyQ</a>
Trop w. Pierre Saka	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpekqAFoUlw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xpekqAFoUlw</a>
Un dia sin ti w. Segura (F: Un jour sans toi)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsoP7AGS-iY">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsoP7AGS-iY</a>
Un jour sans toi (S: Un dia sin ti)	
Un p'tit coup de chapeau w. Michel Philippe-Gérard	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTDdsTuBjmw">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sTDdsTuBjmw</a>
Vachement bon	
Viens chez moi w. Jacques Hourdeaux (E: I'll Believe The Gypsy)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChzUoDzE-20">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChzUoDzE-20</a>
Viva Napoli (Lido Revue)	
When I'm In A Lovin' Mood	
Why Is A Good Man / Girl So Hard To Find? (F: Même si)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCrBtvekTgs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gCrBtvekTgs</a>
You Made Up My Mind	
You're Simply Mad'moiselle (Lido Revue)	
You're The Greatest Love w. Jo Bouillon, Pierre Guillermin (F: Si tu voulais chérie)	<a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPKd2x6DzHc">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sPKd2x6DzHc</a>

## Discography

In this list of records, we only give those in which Jimmy Davis is himself the singer of all the songs. We name the songs but do not repeat other details such as who some were written with, or give the YouTube links to those that have one. This information can be found in the list of songs above.

### Jimmy "Loverman" Davis par Jimmy "Loverman" Davis

- Lover Man
- J'ai de la veine
- Blue Valley
- C'est beau
- Why Is A Good Girl So Hard To Find
- 
- Un dia sin ti
- L'amour est venu sous mon toit
- Darlin' You Are So Delicious
- Un p'tit coup de chapeau
- Sugar, Sugar Lady

Concerteum  
TCV 40 (released in 1954), 10" LP  
and then GEM (Guilde européenne du microsillon) 149  
(1959), 10" LP

Aaron Bridgers, piano  
Heinz Grah, bass  
Michel de Villers, saxo and clarinet  
Bernard Planchenault, drums

### Je t'aime... Je t'aime

- Trop
- Frimousse
- Je t'aime...Je t'aime
- Si j'avais une amie
- Tout d'une pièce
- 
- Je cherche une belle
- C'est beau
- Miam, miam, miam
- Si par bonheur
- Tango Picasso

La Voix de son Maître  
FDLP 1071, 10" LP  
1958

Jo Moutet orchestra  
Wal-berg (Voldemar Rosenberg) orchestra

### Jimmy "Lover Man" Davis

- Je t'aime... Je t'aime
- 
- Trop

La Voix de son Maître  
7 GF 452 M, 7" Single

### Jimmy "lover man" Davis

- Frimousse
- Si j'avais une amie
- 
- Tout d'une pièce
- Tango Picasso

La Voix de son Maître  
7 EGF 241, 7" EP  
1957

### Frimousse (Musetto)

- Frimousse
- 
- Si j'avais une amie

La Voix de son Maître  
7 GF 397, 7" Single  
1957

**Je cherche une belle**

- Je cherche une belle
- Si par bonheur

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- C'est beau
- Miam, miam, miam

La Voix de son Maître / Pathé-Marconi  
7 EGF 268, 7" EP  
1957

Jo Moutet orchestra

**Jimmy "Lover Man" Davis**

- Tango Picasso

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- Tout d'une pièce

La Voix de son Maître  
7 GF 396  
1957

**Music**

Jimmy Davis was also a composer of music by itself. I have not found any information on this but Jacqueline Baraduc kindly indicated the five items below.

Music of the musical, "Le voleur de blues".

Opus no. 1

3 préludes 1/4

Fugue moderne

Louez Dieu