

## In search of Jimmy Davis

by François Grosjean

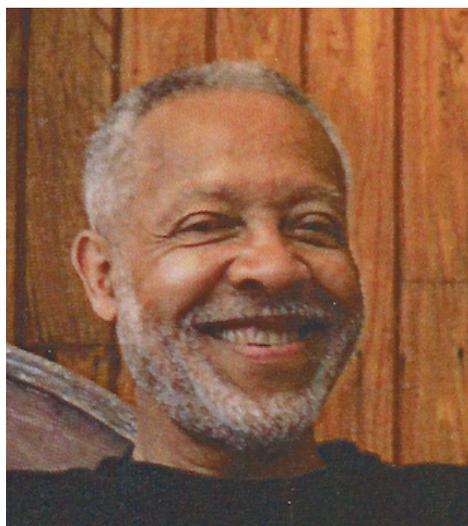
This should be read after perusing "The American jazz musician who saved my life".

Extract taken from the unpublished version of *In Search of Roger and Sallie*

© François Grosjean

I contacted a few jazz specialists who knew Jimmy Davis by name, and I even found a few people who had been at 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, was born in Madison, Georgia, USA, in 1915 and 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 finds on avenues in Paris, firmly



Jimmy Davis at 70 years old

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, 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, a rather 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 when he first arrived in Paris in 1945. 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.

I am still reconstructing the life of Jimmy Davis with the help of the information I obtained during my stay in Paris and also with data from the United States, such as newspaper articles and, above all, his 25 year correspondence with his friend, Langston Hughes, the great African-American poet and writer. Here is what I have learned so far. After a few years in Georgia, Jimmy's family moved to Gary, Illinois, and then to Englewood in New Jersey. He went to the local high school there, and as he was an extremely gifted musician, he got accepted into Julliard where he studied piano and composition. A benefactress paid for his schooling while he was there. In the late 1930s, he composed the famous song, "Lover Man", with Roger (Ram) Ramirez and Jimmy Sherman but couldn't place it at first. Finally, he offered it to Billie Holiday who, a few years later, recorded it for the first time. It was an immediate hit and it quickly became a classic sung by the very best.

In the early 1940's, Jimmy Davis tried to make a living as a songwriter and composer but had to do small jobs to increase his revenues such as giving private piano lessons. His life was to change dramatically when the United States entered the war. He enlisted in the Army and as an active member of the NAACP, he asked to serve in an integrated unit, not a segregated one. He even offered to do his military duty in the Canadian Armed Forces which did not separate its soldiers according to their origin, but this was refused. The case of "Private James Davis" became quite well known and he received the support of numerous people including Richard Wright and Langston Hughes (that's when he met him) who wrote articles in the New York daily, PM. Finally, he spent 13 days in jail before resigning himself to joining the unit he had been assigned to. He spent three and a half years in the Army, was appointed Warrant Officer, and made a band leader. Unfortunately, he did suffer from the discrimination that was still rampant in the Army and this had an impact on his health as can be seen in his letters to Langston Hughes.

In March 1945, Jimmy Davis was sent to France with his band. He stayed there only six months but this short trip marked him and would have an important influence on the rest of his life. As soon as he arrived, he wrote to Langston Hughes that Paris was "exactly what the doctor had ordered". That summer, when he met Roger and Sallie (my parents), he followed a French language and culture course offered to American soldiers by the University of Paris. He also travelled a bit around the country and met many French people who befriended him. He returned to the US at the end of 1945, left the Army, and moved to Hollywood where he followed acting

courses at the Actors' Lab. He tried to find some work but was once again confronted with discrimination - he was only offered stereotypical roles when his talents would have allowed him to have leading roles. That's when he decided to move to France for good and he arrived back in Paris in late 1947. The welcome he received was extremely warm as his classic, "Lover Man", had preceded him. It's at that time that he changed his professional name to Jimmy "Lover Man" Davis. The famous French writer, Boris Vian, wrote in the magazine, *Jazz Hot*, that one of the youngest and nicest American composers had just arrived. The next ten years were to be the most creative and successful in Jimmy's life. He composed many hits, some of which were sung by well known artists at the time such as Yves Montand with "J'ai de la veine", Maurice Chevalier with "Trinque, trinque", and Josephine Baker with "You're the greatest love".

Life in France at that time was difficult and Jimmy couldn't count just on his royalties. So he took singing classes and then went on tour doing one-man shows during which he sang his songs and played the piano. He toured in France but also went to Italy, The Netherlands, Spain and Switzerland, among other countries. Ten years after having arrived, he released the LP "Jimmy 'Loverman' Davis" which was digitized and reedited later by the French National Library. On it we discover his charming American accent in French as well as his melodic and playful voice. The songs are varied with blues such as "Blue valley" and "Amour est venu sous mon toit", swing as in "Darling you are so delicious", cool swing with "Why is a good girl so hard to find", and typical French songs such as "C'est beau", and even tango as in "Un dia sin tí" sung in Spanish. He also interpreted his own "Lover Man" on the record.

Jimmy Davis composed some 130 works during his career (lyrics, melodies) according to the French Society of Authors, Composers and Publishers of Music (Sacem). In addition to his work as a pianist and singer, he was a talented actor and had parts in plays (e.g. "Pas de week-end pour un espion", or "Des souris et des hommes") as well as in movies ("La putain respectueuse", "Mélodie en sous-sol" and "Je t'aime moi non plus"). As the years went by, Jimmy was one of the few American expatriate musicians from the 1940s and 1950s, along with his friend Aaron Bridgers, to remain in France. But with changing tastes in music in the latter part of the century, he had difficulties getting his work accepted, and he lived his last years very thriftily with his royalty earnings. This said, his numerous friends made sure that he was never alone and on his eighty-second birthday, they came to celebrate him in his retirement home and show him their affection.

Jimmy Davis' ashes rest in a small cemetery in the center of France, the country which welcomed him and which he adopted. There, a small plaque states, "To you, Jimmy Davis, who will remain forever our "Lover Man", because it was so." I hope that I will be able to visit the cemetery one day and lay a rose on his grave. It would be my small gesture of love for the man who saved my life. In the meantime, I will continue to research his life and do everything I can to have his work recognized on both sides of the Atlantic.