

**DR/194: *Static Strut* – A Song Written for Sylvester Ahola - Submitted by Albert Haim**

Paul Specht and His Orchestra 1

Paul Specht's orchestra was the first to record *Static Strut*, a composition by Phil Wall (music) and Jack Yellin (lyrics). Pianist Phil Wall was a good friend of trumpeter Sylvester "Hooley" Ahola. In the Fall of 1925, Phil and Hooley were members of Ruby Newman's orchestra at the Buckminster Hotel in Boston, MA, and became good friends. Just prior to that engagement, during the summer of 1925, Hooley had been a member of Lou Calabrese's band at the Casino, Newport, Rhode Island.

At the end of the summer, the Lou Calabrese and Paul Specht orchestras engaged in a battle of the bands, and Specht had a chance to see Hooley in action. Specht realized that Hooley was an excellent musician –equally adept at handling hot solos and straight scores- and wanted to hire him for his band. However, Hooley was already committed to join Ruby Newman's band. During the fall of 1925, Specht bombarded Hooley with telegrams asking him to join the band in New York. Finally, at the end of December 1925, Hooley accepted the offer, and he and Phil Wall joined Paul Specht at the Moulin Rouge Café on Broadway. [1]

In addition to his remarkable talent for music, Sylvester Ahola was mechanically inclined. As a 15-year old high school student, he obtained his Amateur Wireless Operator's License, and two years later, he secured a First Class Commercial License. Hooley was also interested in photography and aviation. He conveyed to Phil Wall his excitement about radio transmission and, in recognition of his friend's enthusiasm, Phil named his newly composed tune *Static Strut*, a reference to interference of radio reception by lightning and other sources of electromagnetic radiation. A few years later, Phil Wall also became a "radio ham." [1]

The Columbia recording of *Static Strut* by Paul Specht and His Orchestra begins with Johnny Morris, drummer and vocalist with the band, speaking the words "Station C-O-L," an obvious reference to Columbia Records. According to Brian Rust's and Tom Lord's discographies [2] [3], Specht recorded *Static Strut* on Jan 14, 1926. Take 5 was mastered (matrix # 141494) and issued as Col 627-D. The 78-online listing for the recording [4] also gives Jan 14, 1926 as the date of the issued take # 5. However, Brian Rust, in his monumental compilation of Columbia Recordings [5, 6] provides the following information:



41494-1-2-3 *Static Strut* Jan 14, 1926  
141495-5-6 *Static Strut* Apr 1, 1926 Col 627-D

The April 1, 1926, date for the recording of the issued take # 5 is corroborated by other discographical data. [4, 5] The flip side of Col 627-D is *Show That Fellow the Door*, recorded by Paul Specht and His Orchestra on April 1, 1926, matrix # 141901-2. In contrast, the two recordings made on the same day (Jan 14) as the rejected takes 1-3 of *Static Strut*, *Take this Rose*, matrix # 141492 and *Drifting Apart*, matrix # 141493, were issued as Col 554-D. [4,5]

The day after the unsuccessful attempts to record *Static Strut* for Columbia, Paul Specht's band, under the pseudonym of the Consolidated Club Orchestra, recorded the tune again: Jan 15, 1926, matrix # 106543, issued as Pathé Actuelle 36392 and Perfect 14573. As was the case for the Columbia recording, the arrangement was by Phil Wall; however, the two recordings differ in several respects. As indicated above, the Columbia recording begins with Johnny Morris speaking the words "Station C-O-L."



This gimmick is not repeated in the Pathé/Perfect recording. Neither is Hooley's unusual "Morse Code" break immediately after Morris' announcement. Hooley describes the background to what he plays here, "Being a radio ham I knew what static was, and I was imitating a spark transmitter on my trumpet, and I glissando up and play Q-R-N, which means 'static is strong'." [1]

The Columbia recording consists mostly of ensemble work, except for a 16-bar trombone solo by Al Philburn. In contrast, the Pathé/Perfect includes a series of solos, 16 bars by Hooley on trumpet, 16 bars by Al Philburn on trombone, 32 bars by Phil Wall on piano, and 16 bars by Ernie Warren on alto saxophone.

*Static Strut* was a fairly popular tune in 1926 and early 1927, with several recordings in the US, England, and Germany. The following are the recordings of the tune in 1926-1927 in chronological order:

**Consolidated Club Orchestra** (Paul Specht), New York, February 15, 1926, Pathé Actuelle 36392, Perfect 14573

**Paul Specht and His Orchestra**, New York, April 1, 1926, Columbia 627-D

**The Dixie Stompers (Fletcher Henderson)**, New York, April 14, 1926, Harmony 197-H

**Original Memphis Five**, New York, April 16, 1926 Victor 20039

**Golden Gate Orchestra (California Ramblers)**, New York April 23, 1926, Edison 51746

**Don Parker and His Band** at the Piccadilly Hotel, London, London c. May 1926, Vocalion X-9810

**Erskine Tate's Vendome Orchestra** (with **Louis Armstrong**), Chicago, May 28, 1926, Vocalion 1027

**Savoy Orpheans**, Hayes, Middlesex, June 4, 1925, HMV B-5083

**The Varsity Eight** (California Ramblers), New York, June 25, 1926, Cameo 975

**Eugene Brockman's Dance Orchestra (Bert Firman's Dance Orchestra)**, London, Dec 29, 1926, Homochord D 1061

**Gabriel Formigini mit seinem Orchester**, Berlin, January, 1927, Vox 8443.

After a hiatus of about 45 years, the tune was taken up by the 1920s revival bands that were beginning to gain popularity in the early 1970s. Between 1972 and 2006, there were nearly twenty recordings of *Static Strut* by such bands, and in such diverse geographical locations as Argentina, England, Holland, Hungary, Slovakia, Switzerland, and the United States. Evidently, this particular "Static" is still strong – or "Q-R-N", as Phil and Hooley would say!

#### **Acknowledgments**

I am grateful to Nick Dellow for his detailed reading of the manuscript, and for helpful suggestions. The record label images were kindly supplied by Rob Rothberg and Steve Hester. I thank Mick Johnson for calling my attention to the Homocord recording.

[1] *Sylvester Ahola, The Gloucester Gabriel* by Dick Hill, Scarecrow Press, Inc., Metuchen, New Jersey, 1993.

[2] *Jazz and Ragtime Records, 1897-1942*, Brian Rust, Mainspring Press, Denver, Colorado, 2002.

[3] *The Jazz Discography*, Tom Lord, <http://www.lordisco.com/tjdonline.html>

[4] "The Online Discographical Project," Steve Abrams, <http://www.78discography.com/COL500D.htm>

[5] *The Columbia Master Book Discography, Volume III: Principal U.S. Matrix Series, 1924-1934*, by Brian Rust, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, 1999.