

ALTON PURNELL

I [only] Digest-Retyped

August 29, 1958

Also present: William Russell

Alton Purnell was born April 16, 1911, at 726 St. Peter Street, in the Vieux Carre [French Quarter, of New Orleans]. His father played drums, but not with any bands of note. AP's brother, Theodore Purnell, is a sax player [clarinet]; Theodore has been sick, but at last report, is recovering. He is three years older than AP. When AP was about ten years old, his mother moved out of the Vieux Carre, and AP began to hear and become interested in jazz; the first jazz he heard was from bands playing advertising jobs, on trucks. AP's brother is three years older than AP. AP first wanted to play drums (he began by beating on bread delivery boxes left at grocery stores), but never got around to it. His mother later moved next door to the old Cooperators Hall (also called Hopes Hall), and AP began hearing bands playing there: Chris Kelly, Guy Kelly, Papa Celestin, Kid Rena, Manuel Perez, Buddie Petit, et al. When AP was small, he also heard Louis Armstrong, but only in parades. Although christened Catholic, AP went with his Baptist mother to a church at St. Peter and Liberty; the preacher was [Elder?] Cole; AP heard some wonderful music there. AP heard "Blind Frank" there, who was one of the greatest New Orleans preachers.

AP tells how he became inspired to take up music as a livelihood: he had a good voice, and sang while in school; he [later] sang with such piano players as "Little Willie," George E. Parker, and "Red" Cayou [sp?], when they played for house parties. AP then met Bernell Santiago, "a marvelous piano player," and began going with Santiago to various house parties, singing at them, bumming with Santiago. Santiago showed him a few chords on the piano. Santiago didn't read, but he could play anything he heard. AP practiced his chords until he could play "Stagolee" and other blues he heard around town; then he met a fellow who taught him how to play "Indian

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Love Call", the first popular number AP learned how to play. AP's real interest in piano dates from the time mentioned. His brother [Theodore] had begun playing sax about that time, also; from ten to fifteen musicians would rehearse every day at the home of Theodore and AP; AP says they rehearsed so much that he learned their tunes from beginning to end, and could whistle them. AP says Theodore became one of New Orleans' top saxophone players. AP wanted to "barrel house," although Theodore tried to get him to study music, going so far as to try to teach him sax; the results were very funny to both of them, as AP was never able to play sax at all.

AP tells of his first job: sometime during the Depression, some people were looking for George E. Parker to play for their party; AP was helping them look for him; when they couldn't find Parker, the people wished they could find a piano player who could play even one or two pieces only; AP told them he could play one or two, so he was hired. The party was near the lake; AP's singing helped him out a lot, too. AP was paid \$15 for the job. He later began playing jobs here and there, mostly for the fun of it. His friend, Bernell Santiago, had a job at the Pelican Annex, but he liked to play for fun, rather than money, so he quit. The banjo player on the job, Joe, who was called "Van", persuaded AP to take the job; Joe showed AP how to build chords, and AP caught on quickly. Although he could play only chords, AP played for jam sessions which would occur at the Pelican Annex. Musicians from the steamer Capitol would come to play; all the greatest players of that day, including Son Johnson, Taft (from the boat), and Eugene Porter, would come to play. AP was on that job for over a year; when he left, he thinks he knew all the chords being used at the time. Theodore Purnell, who helped AP further in his study of music, was then playing with Walter Pichon; Pichon also taught AP (Pichon began playing on the boat shortly after the time mentioned). AP learned enough about [reading] music to enable him to learn a piece by practicing. Sam Morgan died about

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this time, and his brother, Isaiah Morgan, took over the band, which continued making the trips it had made under Sam's leadership. AP went with that band, remaining with them two or three years. Then AP began doing trio work; his singing helped him a lot, as he couldn't play much solo work. AP remembers playing on Bourbon Street, still residential in those days, when there were only two places on it. In the trio were AP, Albert "Fernandez" Walters, [trumpet?] and Lionel Torregano [sp?] (who had also been with Isaiah Morgan, on drums); they worked together at the place [on Bourbon] for about three or four years. AP then (time of World War II) worked some with George Lewis; he recalls playing for girls to dance at army camps, in a trio consisting of himself, [piano &] leader, Lewis, and a drummer, Robert Davis; the job lasted only two or three weeks for AP, who returned to play single dates. He played evenings [i.e., probably late afternoon] at the House That Jack Built, which was on Bourbon, then beginning to build up [as the center of N.O. night life]. Then the Famous Door, right on the corner [from Jack Built?], opened; Smiling Joe had the band there, and when the piano player there left, AP got the job. He retained his job at The House That Jack Built, where he played, for about two more months, but the double job was too hard, so he played only the one with Smiling Joe. He would also get extra jobs occasionally; he played with George Lewis, and several jobs with Kid Howard.

AP got a lot of experience "cross-chording" (i.e., playing in keys different from the rest of the band) when he played in country towns; the pianos were invariably bad, so he learned to play in pitch with the band, but in a different piano key.

AP quit working on Bourbon Street; he soon relieved William Houston (then also president of the [colored] musicians union in N.O.) on piano in Sidney Desvignes'

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band (one of the best in N.O.), so that Houston could take a vacation. AP says he doesn't know how he got the job, as there were many better pianists (he mentions Adam Cato [sp?], whom he met about five months ago in San Diego) available; Desvignes, however, had already tried two of the better men, but they would not play the music as written, so Desvignes got AP. AP didn't consider himself in the class with the other men in the band, which included: Alvin Alcorn, [trumpet]; Theodore Purnell, [sax]; Louis Cottrell [Jr.], clarinet and sax; Joe Phillips, trumpet; Louis Nelson, trombone; [Narvin] Kimball, guitar. AP learned a lot with Desvigne's band; AP could play chords, but had difficulty reading the many stock arrangements Desvigne had, as they didn't have the chords [symbols] written out much; AP had to take two or three numbers home with him every night to practice. AP became one of the best piano players Desvigne had, as AP played rhythm piano, which was what Desvigne wanted. [Mantan Moreland?] came to N.O. [in a review?]; a 16-piece band was part of the group; they had no piano player with them, so they asked Desvigne (who led his band as part of the show) if they could use AP; AP was afraid to try at first, but then found that their piano parts (from their special arrangements, which they used exclusively) were written chord symbols; he did his part so well that he was offered \$25 per night for 32 dates they had to play on their way to New York; AP declined, being afraid of the reputation of New York musicians.

Then AP worked around Bourbon Street, until he went to New York with George Lewis, to play with Bunk [Johnson]; AP remained with Lewis after that.

AP was quite young when Steve Lewis (who played with [A.J.] Piron) was playing, but he heard him a few times; he recalls that Bernell Santiago won a piano playing contest, held on the Astoria [Roof Garden?], defeating Steve Lewis and Walter Pichon,

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the best pianists in N.O.

AP was fortunate to be able to hear Udell [Wilson?], then playing at a honky tonk, the Blues Breakers (Orleans near Liberty); AP was told that Udell made piano rolls. AP was too young to go in, but he could hear from outside.

At the Wagon Top was "Boogie Woogie," who played that style; he was crippled.

When AP was just learning to play, he would sometimes be chased away from bar room pianos by "Papa Crutch," (not a very good piano player), who would tell AP to get up, that he didn't know what he was doing; AP was able to retaliate in the same manner sometime later.

"Plutson" Johnson, a hunch-back who was not a very good musician, but who played nice, taught AP a lot on piano.

AP regrets not having learned to play correctly, as his unorthodox fingering holds him back sometimes. He never had a piano in his home; he got his first personal piano 12 or 14 years ago; when he wanted to practice, before then, he went to bars, all of which had pianos then.

All the old halls had pianos in them, but very few bands playing here used them, as there were very few piano players; the few good ones were playing with bands which got the most work. Other piano players were working in Storyville (operating, illegally, in AP's youth), playing in the houses; AP himself played some jobs there. There were also some bands playing in the area. [Probably in the thirties. Cf. p. 2, p.2]

Talk of the Alley, which was on St. Bernard and Claiborne, right behind the St. Bernard Market, and was a cabaret. AP heard Guy Kelly there.

Bernell Santiago was AP's favorite piano player; Bernell could imitate phonograph records (e.g., Earl Hines), and could play his own style. Bernell's ideas were

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great, too; Pichon wanted to teach him [to read] music, in exchange for some of Bernell's ideas; Bernell didn't want to learn to read. Bernell could even play piano with his toes; he also could play with his palms up. Bernell was younger than AP; he looked something like an Indian; he had coal-black hair; very good-looking. AP played intermissions at Gasper's, relieving Bernell; an opera conductor heard Bernell play one night, and said no one could play that well. When Duke Ellington's band came to town, they wanted to take Bernell with them, as a soloist, but he didn't want to go. Bernell never recorded. [See non-commercial recordings in John D. Reid collection, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock, Ark.] All his siblings, with the exception of one brother, played; his mother also played; AP thinks Willie Santiago, the great banjo player, was his uncle. [correct. RBA] Bernell could play before his feet could touch the ground [from the seat at the piano].

AP likes jazz; he could have made more money playing with Smiling Joe when he went to New York. but he preferredⁿ playing with George Lewis and Bunk Johnson; he says Lewis "has one of the greatest authentic jazz bands that ever lived, and that there will never be another band like his after those men have passed."

End of Reel I