

ALBERT BURBANK
Reel I [of 2]--Digest--Retype
March 18, 1959

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Also present: William Russell, Ralph Collins.

Albert Burbank was born on Prieur and [at] Allen [Streets] in New Orleans, March 25, 1902. He does not know that his parents were musical; his father had an accordian, but he didn't play anything on it; none of his aunts or uncles were musical. Asked about his interest in music, and about early exposure to music, AB says he had a brother who used to give [promote] a lot of picnics at the lake; Manuel Perez and ["Big Eye"] Louis Nelson were most often hired to provide the music; AB went along on the picnics, as did a lot of other children, and AB would listen to the music; his ears were tuned to the clarinet especially. He didn't try any musical instrument other than clarinet, except harmonica, which he gave up because he couldn't play it well, and because he couldn't "get anything out of it" [make any money with it], because so many people played harmonica in those days. He bought a used clarinet for \$9 when he was about 17 years old [i.e., 1919]; he blew it, but could not play it very much (It was an Albert system; AB says he didn't know anyone around New Orleans at that time who had a Boehm system clarinet.), so he made arrangements to take lessons from Lorenzo Tio, Jr. He bought an Otto Langey method book, at Tio's instruction, and went to Tio's house for his first lesson; Tio told him he could not teach him, because he was going to New York, with [A. J.] Piron's band [1923]. AB was unable to get

[Alphonse] Picou or any of the other well-known clarinetists to teach him, as they were all working; he began taking lessons from [Walter?] Devernay, a tinsmith, who taught him all he [Devernay] knew in two or three months. AB could play a few numbers by this time, and Louis Gallaud, pianist, asked him to play a job, just the two of them, at a party. AB, at the time in doubt of his ability to play a satisfactory job, says the performance went well; answering WR, he says they played a variety of music, inserting a waltz every three or four numbers. AB's first job with a band was as a substitute for Adolphe Alexander [Jr.] in Isaiah Morgan's band, at Artisan Hall; answering WR, AB says the bands of Isaiah and Sam Morgan, and combined, played mostly "by ear," but they would buy some music and rehearse it until they had committed it to memory, then they would dispense with the written music. WR asks about the musicians, especially clarinetists, that AB heard in his youth; AB says Lorenzo Tio, Jr., was his favorite in those days, and that Louis ["Big Eye"] Nelson was good, too, in those days. WR asks AB about double embouchure on clarinet; AB says he always has used the double embouchure [upper and lower lips touching the mouthpiece, rather than upper teeth and lower lip touching mouthpiece], and later says he thanks Devernay for teaching him that. He says he thinks all the old-time clarinetists used double embouchure, that he knew only one who used single, and that was Georgie

Boyd. [!! Cf. other interviews] WR says Professor [Manuel] Manetta, who teaches Ralph Collins clarinet, told him that George Baquet used single embouchure, and had worn down not only his mouthpiece, but also his teeth. Sam Dutrey and Barney Bigard are mentioned as being double embouchure men, and George Lewis is mentioned as a single embouchure player. [Some excellent "legitimate" clarinet teachers advocate use of double embouchure, and some equally good teachers advocate single embouchure; one good teacher C. K. Butler, U. of Ala., told me a person should use the embouchure he found most comfortable and effective--PRC.] AB answers WR, saying he never heard [Louis] "Papa" Tio, or any of the Tios other than Lorenzo, Jr. WR says Papa Tio taught Albert Nicholas, Barney Bigard and even Big Eye Louis had some lessons from him. AB says he himself took some lessons from Big Eye Louis. AB tells WR that Big Eye Louis taught him from the written music; AB says when he quit taking from Devernay, he went to Big Eye; Big Eye helped straighten his division [of note values] out; AB quit taking from him when AB was without a job, although Big Eye Louis told him to come anyway. When AB got another job, he did not go back to Big Eye Louis, however. AB began playing with various small bands around town; he says that Barney Bigard and Adolphe Alexander, who were playing in the band of Omer Bernard, trumpet player, would frequently, one or the other, send AB as a

substitute; the other members of Bernard's band didn't like to see AB show up, because he couldn't play very well at first, but he continued substituting, and eventually, by practicing, learned most of the numbers the band played. Omer Bernard decided AB was competent enough, and more certain to appear as scheduled, so he hired AB as a regular member of the band. WR returns to double embouchure, asking if AB has had any dental erosion because of playing (although his teeth are cushioned by his lips); AB assures him that he has had no wear, and says his teeth are his natural ones. WR says George Lewis, who has false teeth, has told him he has worn out one set of false teeth by playing with a single embouchure. AB did not know about or hear George Baquet when AB was young; he knew about him a couple of years before Baquet's death, when Baquet had returned to New Orleans and was working in a bar room on Rampart St. AB knew about Charlie McCurdy, but he doesn't remember whether he heard him play or not. WR asks AB about bands, including brass bands, he might have heard when he was quite young; AB says he wasn't allowed to be on the streets, that he was kept in his own yard during his leisure hours [and consequently, did not hear anything like that described]. AB was reared in the 7th Ward, near his present residence. AB's first school, a private one, was on Allen, between Johnson and Prieur, while he lived on Allen, between Johnson and Galvez. Asked about when he

first heard a brass band and about Mardi Gras, AB talks about Mardi Gras, saying it was better then than now, and tells why. He says there were a lot of bands playing, too. AB, answering RC, says he never actually played in a band in a Mardi Gras parade, or on a truck then, but when he first began playing clarinet, he went with his sister and others, all masked, around the streets on Mardi Gras; he played clarinet all day long, and was the only instrumentalist, with the exception of tambourines. WR asks about the Carnival group, the Indians, and asks if AB remembers them, and if they were any different then from what they are now. AB says he remembers one group, the Pocahontas group, and another one which met at Pauger and Claiborne, but he doesn't say anything about either. The Adolphe Alexander herein referred to by AB is AA, Jr., called "Tats," who now plays Boehm system clarinet; AB believes AA, Jr., started on an Albert system clarinet. The first brass band AB ever played in was a band led by D'jalma Ganier, trumpet player; the band played for the Jefferson City Buzzards on Carnival Day, every year for a long time. The same men played in that band every year even though they played only that day; Henry "Booker T" Glass played drum, but AB doesn't remember anyone else, other than those already mentioned. He says there were no saxes in the brass bands then, but there were clarinets and alto and baritone horns. AB never played E^b clarinet; he tried one once,

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but the highness of the pitch bothered him, so he quit trying. WR asks about Albert system clarinets, if some had more keys than others. AB says some had 13 keys, some had 15 keys; he believes 13 keys were the least on any clarinet. AB now plays a French-made clarinet, a La Casell [sp?], but he would like to get a Buffet or a Selmer; Albert system clarinets are hard to find, however. AB never tried a Boehm system clarinet; he tells WR he thinks the Albert tone is better than the Boehm. AB tells WR he can't explain the difference in tones, but it is louder. AB answers WR's question about how AB produces his full sound, which is not covered by the brass; AB says the young players who do not get the big sound are probably using too soft a reed; AB uses a #3 reed. AB uses a Selmer mouthpiece. He says some fellows ruin mouthpieces by filing them to open up the law and the opening; he says mouthpieces can be bought by numbers, each number representing a different lay and/or opening. AB says he got a [Selmer] H-15 4-15 mouthpiece by mistake, that he was supposed to have gotten an H-25 4-15 which is more open, but he has become accustomed to the H-15.

End of Reel I

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Discussion of mouthpieces, etc., continues. AB says the best mouthpiece he ever had was an Imperial, cost \$2.50, and was stolen from his case when he was working at the Mardi Gras [Lounge] [with Paul Barbarin?]. Answering WR, AB says a person has to play on a mouthpiece [or mouthpieces] until he finds one which suits him.

Answering WR, AB says that when he was learning clarinet, he worked during the day from 7 AM until 5:30 PM; he would get up early in the morning to practice, and would continue as soon as he had eaten in the evening.

[regularly?]

The first band AB ever played ^{*regularly?*} (one he helped organize) in had Johnny Dave on banjo, Henry Landry (no relation to [Alcide] "Big" Landry, who played with "Big Eye" Louis [Nelson]) on trumpet and others (trombone, [drums?] and bass) un-named; AB was with that band for about a year, and then he joined the Omer Bernard band. Then AB played several jobs with a good trumpet player named Bush Hall, who played a style similar to that of Buddy Petit (including use of many chromatics). AB also played some with Petit; Petit had an 8-piece band at the time, and played mostly out-of-town jobs--e.g., Bogalusa. The band had two trumpets in it, and one tenor sax, which was played by Henry Harding. AB played with the band sometime between 1925 and 1930. WR says people have told him Petit did not play as well toward

the end of his life as he did when he was younger; AB says he was playing very well, but perhaps not as strong as earlier. AB tells WR that Petit's style consisted of playing "in the staff," and use of mutes, particularly the derby; AB says that the old-timers achieved the effects of many different mutes by using only the derby. Answering RC, AB says Petit's playing in the staff allowed the clarinet to play in a better range, not having to go so high to be heard. Answering WR, AB says he took his solos mostly in the upper register; he says the bands usually allowed the clarinet two choruses, so he would play the melody the first chorus, and "get off" the second. AB says his ensemble style was "mostly chords"[playing an upper harmony to the cornet's melody?]. He says most New Orleans clarinetists played in that style. Asked about Georgie Boyd, AB says Boyd had a big tone and played strong; he was Kid Punch [Miller]'s clarinetist. AB played only one job with Punch, on an advertising truck. Answering RC, AB says the advertising jobs were easier than dance jobs, because the band on the truck would play one short number (three or four choruses), usually a stomp, about every second corner; he says they would sometimes meet other advertising bands, and they would have their battles; each band played its best numbers when they went advertising, and played only four or five different numbers. Answering WR, AB says he played one job with Chris Kelly; comparing him to other

trumpet players, AB says Kelly was strong, and that nobody played the blues as well as he did; Kelly would get better and stronger the longer he played the blues; he used mutes some of the time, and could really do things with a derby. AB says George Lewis will say the same thing, because Lewis played with Kelly. AB doesn't recall having heard Louis Armstrong or Joe Oliver before they went north. Asked to name the band he liked best from the old days, AB says that for dancing, he really did like Sam Morgan's band. He says the band had a better beat [than anyone else]. AB says Sam Morgan was pretty strong and he had a real nice tone on trumpet. Although AB mentioned previously that he had played with Isaiah [Morgan, a brother of Sam, also in the Morgan band], he says he himself never played with Sam. Speaking of bands he played with, AB says he worked several jobs with Bob Lyons' band, and also with the Olympia Band, led by Arnold DePass, drummer; the trumpet player in the Olympia was Elmer "Coo Coo" Talbert. AB says Talbert played in the early days about the same as he did later; he tells WR that Talbert was considered one of the ordinary trumpet players, but was noted for his entertaining, especially his singing. Answering WR, AB says he played a couple of jobs with Manuel Perez, at Milneburg. RC asks about the personnel of Bob Lyons' band when AB played with him; AB says the only one he remembers is Rudolph Beaulieu, a tall, heavy-set drummer; AB tells WR that he

played four or five times with Lyons, and always at parties. Answering WR, AB says the only member of Manuel Perez' band he remembers from the couple of times he played with Perez is Henry ["Booker T"] Glass, drums. AB tells RC and WR that Perez was powerful; although his upward range was not particularly high, he was so powerful that "he'd make you think he was playing high." AB tells RC that a trumpet player who plays "in the staff" [medium range] and sticks to the melody is the easiest to play with. In later years, AB worked with Willie Pajaud at a jitney dance, upstairs at Burgundy and Canal, where they worked about a year; before that, however, they had been about six months at another jitney at St. Charles and Poydras. Wilhemina Bart was playing piano, Alex Bigard, drums, Yank Johnson, trombone. Answering WR. AB says that Yank Johnson lived a good many years longer than his brother, Buddy Johnson, but he doesn't remember the year Yank died, except that it was probably during the Depression [1930's]. After leaving Pajaud, AB formed his own quartet, consisting of himself on clarinet, Albert Jiles, drums, Elmer Talbert, trumpet and Clarence Gabriel, piano; the group worked at the Dandy Inn, on South Jefferson Davis Parkway, until that place was closed. WR says this was after 1938. [Check his notes.] Later on, AB formed a trio, called "The Three Als," which worked mostly at a place on Magazine Street; the other Als were Jiles, drums, and Fortler [sp?], guitar.

WR reminds AB that he worked with Johnny St. Cyr during the same general time; AB recalls that he worked with St. Cyr on Decatur Street, before Bourbon Street became popular [for music, etc.]. AB says that St. Cyr worked with him in the Olympia Band one [once upon a] time [?]. AB answers WR, saying he joined Bill Matthews' band [at the Paddock Lounge] about five years ago; AB was playing with Paul Barbarin at the time, and he had declined one offer to join Matthews' band, but he accepted the next offer. He tells RC that the work is not so bad, but agrees with WR that it would be nicer if they could play a slower number every three or four numbers; he agrees with WR that the band has to play "[When] The Saints [Go Marching In]" about every set.

AB says he wants to mention that his last teacher was Lionel Dupart, who taught his own grandson, Henry Julian, a saxophonist with the Olympia Band; when AB joined that band, Julian persuaded AB to go to Dupart for lessons. AB says Dupart still lives here, that he is a bricklayer or plasterer, and no longer plays. [1963 telephone directory lists Lionel Dupart (sic) at 1023 N. Tonti.]

Responding to WR's question of favorites on clarinet, AB says that he had three or four, they being Johnny Dodds, Jimmie Noone, Lorenzo Tio [Jr.] and "Big Eye" Louis [Nelson]. AB tells RC that he never heard Dodds and Noone in person, just on records. AB says Tio

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had a big tone, played very clean and could fake as well as anyone else. AB repeats, to RC, that he never heard George Baquet. WR mentions Tio's recordings with Piron's band, saying that it is hard to tell, because of the recording techniques of the times, just how Tio did play, and that some of the clarinet solos sound as though they might have been written; AB assures him that Tio could fake, saying that Tio could really be heard when playing a parade. Tio used his regular B^b clarinet for parades, not the higher, more easily heard E^b.

AB answers RC, saying he tried a plastic reed once, but found it unsatisfactory; he says he does not think one can get a tone from the plastic as good as from the cane because the plastic does not soak up any moisture. The reel ends with a continuing discussion of reeds, placement on the mouthpiece, etc.

End of Reel II

\$5.00