

BIG BILL THOMPSON
I [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
March 1, 1961

1

Also present: William Russell, Ralph
Collins, Harold Dejan

[Interview conducted at 2401 Orleans Ave., New Orleans, home of BT]

William Thompson was born June 28, 1895 on Claiborne Ave., between Iberville and Bienville. His father played banjo; he worked in a band playing on the lake excursion steamer Camellia. One person he worked with was Joe Murphy, who played cornet and doubled on banjo. The band worked a boat which left from West End; later, they [boat and all?] moved to Milneburg, using that as a departure point. BT learned how to piano from his brother, Jobie [sp?], who played piano in various places around the city [perhaps making the rounds of bars, etc. and playing for tips--PRC]; BT began playing piano when he was about ten years old. Jobie died about forty-five years ago. Jobie played mostly solo, not with bands. BT learned on the piano his brother had in their home. BT learned by observing, although his brother would show him a thing or two occasionally. BT played ragtime, blues, anything--anything he could whistle he could play. His first jobs were playing for house parties. One of his first [steady?] jobs was at the Old Mill Stream, which was on Carondelet Walk (now Lafitte Street) between Broad and White. BT later played at Lucien's Pavillion, which was at Milneburg. WR mentions, Harold Dejan confirms, that Baby Bruce said he too played at Lucien's. BT was about seventeen years old when he played at Lucien's. He played solo, for dancers who paid to get into the place.

BT names some piano players of his time: George W. Thomas (also a publisher and composer; he wrote and published "New Orleans Hop Scop Blues", among others); Clarence Williams; Frank Crump (the elder, who

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I [of 2]--Digest--Retyped
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2

was the father-in-law of Henry Julian, sax and clarinet, a contemporary of HD); "Chinee Charlie." Those pianists played any type of music--ragtime, blues, populaa tunes of the day, mazurkas, schottisches, etc.--as did BT. BT names some tunes he played: "Chinatown, My Chinatown", "Down By The Old Mill Stream", "In A Little Spanish Town". BT didn't compose any tunes, but he did play one by his brother, Jobie--"Ham and Egg Blues." BT recalls playing with Louis Keppard, guitar, at Eddie Demazilliere's [sp?] place, Decatur at St. Ann (where Fernandez' Wine Cellar is now located); BT says they played "In A Little Spanish Town" about ten times, by request. BT changes the location, saying Demazilliere's cabaret was at Decatur and St. Peter. BT played there after World War I. Willie Santiago [guitar or banjo?] was also in the band; there was one other, but BT doesn't remember who it was.

BT remembers Freddy Keppard, cornet player, who was the brother of Louis Keppard. Keppard played on the [advertising] trucks which traveled around on Sunday; BT mentions others who played on trucks: Joe Oliver, Kid Rena, Buddy Petit, Punch [Miller], Chris Kelly. BT got to know Sharkey Bonano from the trucks; Sharkey would ride with the bands, playing his cornet ~~with~~ with them. BT tells of often playing the piano at Sharkey's house, which was on Miró, between St. Peter and Carondelet Walk; Sharkey was still learning to play them.

Some bands which were around when BT was young: Freddy Keppard. Joe Oliver, Manuel Perez, Dave DePass (HD mentions Arnold Metoyer, but BT says he doesn't remember Metoyer from that time), Eureka Band, Tuxedo Band. The Tuxedo also had a brass band, for parades. The Bands BT mentioned were the leading bands of that time, he says.

BT played mostly solo piano, seldom with bands; he played a lot of house parties, for white and colored. He also played for dances.

BT doesn't think he could play piano at all anymore; he quit playing about forty years ago. HD doubts that it was so long ago, as he played with both BT and with Frank Crump, although he himself was only twelve to thirteen years old at the time. BT says that Frank was still playing when he himself quit, and that Baby Bruce was just beginning to play his best when he, BT, quit. BT was working on the riverfront when the depression [1929] arrived. He quit playing because there was no money in it. Juke boxes were taking over most of the trade; the union was formed around that time.

BT could play anything he could whistle; he never learned to read, always playing by ear.

Talk about house parties; BT would play a piece and stop for a while, to let people walk around, buy a drink, things like that. BT would play a verse and two, perhaps three, choruses; then he would stop,

BIG BILL THOMPSON
I [of 2]
March 1, 1961

4

resting for 15 or 20 minutes. Talk about money, value of money then and now, etc. BT often played for free; he would wander into a house party, play a few numbers, wander away to another one, all without pay. He says he played more free jobs than he played pay jobs. The house parties were not advertised, except by word-of-mouth; fish fries were announced by hanging a red lantern in front of the location.

Talk about piano playing contests, which were informal; the pianists would be in a place and decide to play to see who was best. Some of the pianists who played in the contests: Red Cayeaux, Little Willie, Big Cato, Little Cato, One-Legged Alexis [sp?], Blind Frank, Udell [Wilson?], who lived in Carrollton; BT mentions often getting into contests in the Garden District.

BT recalls telling Walter ["Fats"] Pichon, then about 12 years old and living at Miro and Orleans, that he would be great someday. HD says that in the old days, Pichon played like Baby Bruce and Burnell [Santiago], but that he plays differently now. HD says Pichon's brother-in-law, Eddie Loomis, could also play pretty well.

Big and Little Cato were father and son, both good pianists. Other good pianists were Eugene [?], Ernest Caresse [sp?], and Dwight Newman; the latter two were about the best in the city at the time BT was playing. Newman could play anything; he could read, too. Caresse, now dead, was older than BT; Newman was younger. HD says his son [Joe Newman] plays trumpet in Count Basie's band. BT says Newman worked as a family chauffeur, on St. Charles Avenue. There were many other good pianists, but BT can't remember their names.

BT remembers, from his early childhood, Alphonse Picou, clarinet; he remembers hearing him play "Tiger Rag", "High Society", and others. The first clarinetist he ever heard play the "High Society" clarinet solo was

Dave Depass; he heard Picou play it later. BT remembers George Baquet, Sidney Vigne, "Chinee Babe"--Chinee Babe could play cornet, Vigne could play cornet and clarinet. [Could "C B" be SV's brother? RBA seems to remember Jeanne Vigne saying this.] BT remembers Buddy Bolden's band; he heard it when he was about 7 years old. Bolden had a piece he played about himself; HD and WR quote words from "Funky Butt" or "Buddy Bolden's Blues". BT heard Bolden at West End. BT heard Chinee Charlie play at the West End [Tavern?], on Pontchartrain Boulevard. Lincoln Park and Johnson Park are mentioned; BT remembers them. He names others: Dixie Park; Commercial Park (on the Bayou St. John), which was across from Southern Park. The last two mentioned were on the Bayou St. John at the end of Dumaine Street, near City Park. They were for colored and white; there was no segregation in those days. The places at the lake were for both races; Lucien's Pavillion was [for colored only (owned by a colored man?)]. Lucien's had flying horse [i.e., carousel] and everything [i.e., other rides].

End of Reel I.

BIG BILL THOMPSON

II [of 2]

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6

There were bands and dancing at the parks previously mentioned [Dixie, Commercial and Southern]; BT never played at the parks; he did play at the Lake. He remembers balloon ascensions; one rider was Billy Cayeaux [sp?], who would parachute from his balloon.

A train to Spanish Fort, the Bienville train, started from Canal and Basin, [to Bienville St.], to St. Louis Street, then behind City Park and on to Spanish Fort; it had a steam engine. It would go out on the Cape Charles Wharf, switch, and return to town [cf. E. Charlton Harper's books.]. BT recalls that there were bands playing at the lake then, on Sundays, and that he was 6 Or 7 years old at the time. The music was mostly "ragtime," It was jazzed up, like music is jazzed today. The musicians jazzed up most anything; BT played a schottische called [Remembrance?], which could also be played as a waltz. BT never played quadrilles, although he saw them danced; quadrilles were even danced on theatre stages. BT mentions the Black Patti [real name: Sisseretta Jones?-RBA] show, which was one of the shows which would come to the local theatres.

BT has heard blues all his life; he [jokingly] says he thinks the people who came here [meaning the first settlers?] found the blues already here. Blues were played, sung and danced; people made up their own blues. BT mentions dance steps, among them the "Slow drag", which were danced to blues. Blues were played at various tempos. BT says he himself played the tune "Chinatown" in many tempos and time signatures, even playing it in waltz time; he would play almost everything he knew in waltz time, and then jazz the same tunes. Talk about blues moods: HD says blues are not necessarily sad; he says sad blues are like when someone breaks up with his sweetheart and then sings about it; BT says sad blues are like when you get drunk and lose all your money.

BT heard a lot of blues singers, including those who appeared in theatres, but he doesn't remember their names. He himself never traveled with a show, or traveled to play music; however, he did play his way out of Chicago, when he was broke; he played at the White Castle cabaret--just sat down and began playing "Yellow Dog Blues"; he picked up \$5-6 in tips; he was about 19 years old at the time. He heard a lot of bands in Chicago; the bands just didn't have the jazz that was in New Orleans; later, after people like Louis Armstrong came to Chicago, the bands had more jazz. BT met a lot of New Orleans musicians there; he was there before Armstrong was. After getting the money at the White Castle, BT hoboed back to New Orleans, taking about 6 days to do it. He also played in St. Louis [same trip?] he played 4 or 5 days in a place run by an old man named Bailey; he played "Yellow Dog Blues" and "Beale Street Blues". He didn't get much money in tips, and was not paid anything by the owner, so he came back to New Orleans. He heard a lot of good ragtime pianists in St. Louis; there were plenty good musicians there; there were better jazz musicians there than there were in Chicago. "They had piano players around there by the thousands; just say it and you had one." New Orleans was the same-- plenty of piano players. BT says juke boxes put a lot of piano players out of work; he says it was the same with organ grinders, too: when an organ grinder would come around, all the people at parties would leave the parties to hear the organ grinder.

"High Society" was a number BT used a lot in contests; he says he could win them with that. Other numbers he featured were "Chinatown", "In A Little Spanish Town," pretty nearly any song. WR says Baby Bruce says every piano player had his own special way of ending tunes; BT says you couldn't find five fellows who would stop alike. BT had his own way of winding up.

Pianists BT liked: Frank Crump (the best), Clarence Williams, George W. Thomas (who wouldn't play much, preferring to run his publishing house). BT says everybody considered his brother Juba Thompson the best, but BT like the ones he named better. Dwight Newman was good (he could play by note), and so was Ernest Caresse[sp?], but they were later than those just mentioned. BT remembers Tony Jackson as a good piano player; he was the first one BT ever heard sing while playing; Jackson worked around in the District. BT played in some of the places in the District, but just casually, never on salary; he would go from place to place, playing here and there; he played in the Vieux Carré [French Quarter] in the same manner.

There was not much music at John Lala's Big 25; it was more of a drinking and gambling place. Pete Lala's, Iberville and Liberty, was a big cabaret, where dancing went on; Lala had a smaller place, on Bienville and Marais. Butterbeans and Susie performed at Lala's big place. BT didn't know Jelly Roll [Morton]. BT remembers Manuel Manetta well. BT knew a lot of musicians; he remembers Tomy Almerico when Tony didn't know what a horn [trumpet] was; BT remembers Tony as a small boy, paddling a boat in the Bayou [St. John], where his father had a houseboat. Sharkey [Bonano] wasn't thinking about playing when BT first knew him; BT says that when he did decide to play, Sharkey went all the way; BT says Sharkey would play on advertising trucks with any one who would let him--Buddy Petit, Manuel Perez, Punch[Miller], Joe Oliver. Truck bands would sometimes have pianos; the piano would lead on such jobs, not the cornet. [BT is confused about the difference between a cornet and a trumpet--RBA.]

Most of the piano players in New Orleans were born and raised in the city, not in some other town, or in the country. Another good piano player, from downtown, was Sam [Galotta?], who could read; Sam played a lot of fancy stuff; Sam hung around the Alley (St. Bernard and Claiborne). Most of the piano players had day jobs; there wasn't any such thing as making a living playing piano then. It is only since the union began that a piano player can make a living playing piano.

BT talks about playing on his brother's piano, at their home; he learned and played by ear; he became good; he could play anything a person could whistle.

BT tells of a technique some other piano players used to make a piano sound like a drum; a sheet of paper was put behind the keys [strings?], so that when they were struck, the paper would sound like a drum. BT didn't use the trick, feeling that it was not necessary. RC says Baby Bruce tells about his good left hand; BT says his own left hand was good. He talks about left hand style; if a pianist is not jazzing, his left hand will play short [i.e., not move much laterally], but when he begins jazzing his left hand will play "that swinging bass", moving widely.

BT says it felt good to play with other Instruments, but the best thing for a piano player was to play solo.

End of Reel II.

