

DON ALBERT

REEL I

DECEMBER 30, 1969 Also present: Richard B. Allen
Real name is Albert Dominique

INTERVIEW IS HELD AT 910 Royal Street, RBA'S APARTMENT

DA first heard Louis Armstrong playing in parades with Jones's Waifs' Home band. DA was then a little kid living on Robertson near St. Anthony. New Orleans is known for parades and also for the advertising bands that used to ride around on wagons. DA met LA after DA formed his own band, and they became ~~real~~ close friends.

A discussion of a "Wabash Blues" recording follows, based on a question from Laurie Wright [editor of Storyville Magazine (see LW-RBA letters on Don Albert article)]. DA says that Troy Floyd, to his knowledge, is not on this recording, but members of his band including DA and Charlie Dixon probably were. He thinks that the same musicians who recorded with Hattie Burleson [and others including Ben Norsingle, Ollie Ross and possibly Texas Tommy. Cf. discographies and below] over a period of three or four days made "Wabash Blues". He will listen to the record again. [Get label and numbers from DA and more information from Wright.]

The history of the Troy Floyd band "goes way back to the days of Alphonso Trent." DA gives a history of the AT band. [I miss the connection of these two bands. RBA.] ^{DA's AT band Dec 3, 1969} TF was organized with mostly Texas men. DA replaced Benno Kennedy in TF's band. DA had a band made up of three [New Orleans (see previous DA reels)] musicians. This trio joined together with a couple of musicians in Dallas [to form another band?]. The other New Orleans musicians then went home. TF never heard DA play before he joined TF's band. DA went to Eastland, Texas, where TF heard him "tune his horn." TF hired him on that basis. [Cf. previous interviews with DA.] DA, then 17 years old, became the first chair man and featured man. Of the ten men in the band, only three or four could be considered readers.

Then played many head arrangements. [Allen Van,] the pianist was a good reader though not a "hell of a piano player." Benno Kennedy was a seasoned musician. AV, DK, drummer [John Humphries], Charlie Dixon, and Troy Floyd, all readers, rehearsed the band, DA imagines. None of the recordings employ written arrangements. The only written arrangements were stocks. DA used several parts, including tp, p, vl and clarinet, when the band played shows. He transposed at sight from vl, clarinet, piano and alto parts. He studied music, and was from a musical family. His grandfather and grandmother were singers. An aunt played piano. One uncle played violin. His uncle, Natty Dominique [and another uncle?] played cornet. DA's son and daughter do not know a note of music and aren't interested. ND was one of his favorite uncles. ND went to [World] War [I] where he was bugler. He returned to the estate [family home] on Urquhart for a short time before moving to Chicago. After DA got his band, he visited ND in Chicago several times. Likewise he visited Barney Bigard frequently in various places.

The TF band changed stocks only slightly.

Charlie Dixon died about 3 or 5 years ago in San Antonio. [Cf. DA, reel ?]. CD was like a father to the band. He was crazy about DA, calling him "Big Jim." CD's main instrument was the tuba. He got a tremendous tone on tuba and trombone. Willie Long and Benny Long were "spellers" (i. e., fair readers). If one got together with fellows who could read a little, arrangements could be learned in a little while. Scott Bagby played tremendous clarinet. Although he could not read at all, he could play in perfect harmony. Now in his 70's he is still active in San Antonio, plays church music now. SB was a natural musician. DA names no source

for his style. After he joined TF, SB doubled on tenor [sax]. He quit the band, and DA got Herschel Evans as SB's replacement. TF's banjoist before John Henry Braggs likewise quit because he was tired of travelling. The band was "almost a family affair" then, but after DA left, they were many changes in the personnel. DA's band also had many changes in the personnel.

DA tried to get Fred Murphy, alto and soprano saxophonist, to replace SB. Murphy played a few dates, but wouldn't leave Dallas.

SB's nickname was "Funny", because he was a funny man, i. e. didn't take kidding well.

Evans was then not a good reader. DA met Evans, then playing alto, when he was with ^{the} T. N. T. Band at the Pelican Hall. Jimmy Westbrook was the drummer. DA later met Evans in Wichita Falls where he was playing tenor with a circus. When Evans played that night with TF's band, DA called only tunes that Evans knew. At that time Evans knew all the tunes that Prince [Robinson] and Coleman Hawkins played. HE was hired, and DA taught him how to read fairly well. He could play some piano. He was not a good clarinetist [then].

Circus bands were then "regular travelling bands." [I judge that he means minstrel shows by circuses and stock shows. RBA.]

Battles of music were a gate attraction, not having any winners or losers. DA remembers one with George E. Lee. Later DA's band had many battles to entice the public in.

✓ There was one [between TF's ~~or DA's~~ and] Walter Page's. There is another Walter Page who is not the bassist. WP's Original Blue Devils had Oran "Kid Lips" Page and Count Basie. DA thinks OP died in England. [Cf. OP biography.]

The name of the TF band was "Troy Floyd and His Orchestra of Gold." The men all had gold instruments. C. G. Conn gave DA the

* [DA in conversation with RBA, Dec. 8, 1976]

first long trumpet that was made, and used his name and photograph in their [advertising] pamphlet. He now plays Selmer.

If Don Albert were to be in a battle of music, [the band] would not rehearse, merely playing their regular routine. The Troy Floyd band rehearsed two or three times a week.

Troy Floyd was a nice fellow although he had some faults. He and DA had their differences. DA views these as a normal reaction to becoming "partly famous." DA doesn't like to speak ill of the dead.

DA didn't hear a brass band after leaving N. O. for many years. The first he heard was following a prophet, Daddy Grace, in Columbia, S. C. This band was not like a N. O. marching band. He imagines they were fairly good musicians [i. e., readers]. DA says they only chance to hear a New Orleans-style brass band out of town would be in a place where New Orleans musicians gathered, i. e., Chicago.

Some of the great Southwest bands, among others which he can't recall, were Troy [Floyd's], [Alphonso] Trent's (these two the most outstanding), Lazy Daddy's [Henry Fillmore] of Galveston, the Royal Garden Band of Texas, which went to Calif., and Eddie Heywood [Sr.]'s band. Most bands had three to five pieces. The Royal Garden Band had "about seven or eight pieces." It was led by Edgar Perry, a tremendous pianist. They played in San Antonio [primarily] *and Texas generally, breaking up in California*

TF's theme was "I'm Afraid." DA sings a bit of it, and says that TF would talk roughly like Ted Lewis during the playing of the tune. TF was more of a gambler than a showman or a salesman, but he got jobs.

George Moret was a rough, loud trumpet player. He could read. DA's family and GM's family were friends. When DA was about eleven years old, GM took him on jobs. GM played "practically the same type of trumpet" as Manuel Perez.

DA began playing professionally at the age of 14. His father would let him go out with the old musicians. His father or mother would take him home after jobs. There were no child-labor restrictions then.

The [Susquehanna Lake-] boat would leave [New Orleans] early in the morning, returning to ^{N^O}New Orleans about dusk. The boat would spend two or three hours at Mandeville, picnicking or visiting the town.

DA's father required that he be at home by 9 [p.m.]. This was as late ~~as late~~ as the time when he "was ready to get engaged to my wife."

When DA visited Buddy Petit in his old shack in the woods near his return to N. O. on the Susquehanna, they talked about music, but there were no lessons. BP apparently had a great knowledge of music judging from his playing or was very gifted. Punch Miller was similar. PM played many notes with great feeling. DA observes that many trumpet players play a lot of notes without feeling. Hypolite Charles, a beautiful trumpet player, had a tremendous feeling in his horn. HC could read and play jazz.

DA's band had no arrangers at first. They used stock [orchestration]s which they rearranged. Their first arranger was alto saxophonist Philander Tiller of Little Rock. PT couldn't play [some of] his own arrangements without study. Arthur Derbigny, Herb Hall, Louis Cottrell also arranged. Other arrangers came in, such as bassist Harold Holmes. Lloyd Glenn, who replaced their first pianist Al Freeman, and Billy Douglas, "one of the greatest trumpet players I ever heard in my life" arranged. Billy Douglas never mentioned Cuban Bennett, and, in fact, he never talked about "anything in common." Alvin "Mickey" Alcorn and BD were good friends.

A few bad notes in arrangements were corrected, and the band members put their own ideas in solos, but the arrangements were not changed much.

Most of TF's men have died. Benny Long was sick about 3 years ago, had lost one leg. Willie Long, Charlie Dixon, TF, Leroy Moore, their first pianist, are all dead. Allen Van, pianist, came into the band through DA's efforts replacing LM. DA was influential with TF, but TF never showed interest in what people said. DA thinks that AV was in the band until DA left the band in 1929 in Fort Worth, Texas.

John Henry Bragg, five-string banjoist and guitarist, also a good musician [reader?], is living in San Antonio; his wife, Ardell Bragg, was a blues singer. John H. B. did not record to DA's knowledge. [Cf. Orin Blackstone, Index to Jazz, New Orleans, 1950.] Henry "Nick" Turner played valve trombone and sousaphone. On the [DA] recordings HNT played sousaphone, and Jimmy Johnson, string bass. HNT played very softly. The band was the first to use three basses, JJ and Harold Holmes on string basses, and HNT on tuba.

[See previous interviews on the use of "swing."] Their billings

read "Don Albert and His Music [~~the~~⁸] America's Greatest Swing Band." Previous billings were "Don Albert and His Ten Pals", followed by "Don Albert and His Ten Pals [~~the~~¹²] All Fourteen of [~~Them~~⁷]", a controversial [sp?] name.

The band rehearsed everytime they got a chance. Being on the road, there was little time. Frank Jacquet, Albert Martin and Louis Cottrell were in charge of business. Louis Cottrell was DA's business manager, handling bookkeeping, payroll, calling intermissions, etc. Sometimes DA would go ahead of the band to get bookings. DA's band should have been the number one band in the nation, but he got tied up with a bad booker, Al Travis. DA's "whole ambition was to get to New York and get my band on the top..." DA almost quit as a band-leader then, but Beansy Fauria, a New Orleans nightclub owner, and ^(Chummy Hyland) encouraged DA to stay in this business, getting DA another bad booker and [lending DA \$4,000?]. DA finally quit in 1940. In addition to bad bookers, musicians had begun to give DA trouble by behaving irresponsibly. His first band was made up of "a bunch of gentlemen." Fats Martin picked up the remenants of the band, and made up a combo of five, six, and seven pieces.

Bernard Goldberg was an admirer of DA's playing and thought that DA would make a bandleader. At the Shadowland [where TF was playing] BG made offers to DA who felt he was not ready to lead a band. When DA returned to New Orleans in 1929 [for few months playing in a band, perhaps his own, which included Ernest Kelly, trombonist. RBA, Jan 8, 1970.], BG came over [to New Orleans] and persuaded DA to organize a band [which DA described as hand-picked to me. It made several bandleaders angry when their men were taken away. RBA, Jan. 8, 1970.] Their first job was the State Fair in Dallas. BG bought them all brand-new uniforms. [BG was their manager?].

BG gave DA \$1,000 to get the band together. DA wishes BG could have stayed with the band. After BG, DA got a Mr. Rabinowitz who was bad.

Don Albert was called Don before he got the band. He thought the shorter name would be better than Albert Dominique. The TF men called him "Don" and "Big Jim."

DA remembers Caffrey Darensbourg being in the recording studio on "the day we made those records" [for Brunswick.] Doubtless he is the mandolinist with Texas Tommy [on Brunswick]. CD played with Manuel Perez on the [Pythian Temple] Roof Garden. He settled in Dallas. Later, CD sent for his brother Percy. Percy and DA were good friends. CD was a genius like John Marrero. JM was the greatest banjo player DA ever heard. CD was a genius on mandolin, banjo and guitar. CD's wife is still living in Dallas. CD was "a little fellow." He got into the "underworld business" about the time DA brought his band there [1929]. He used his gun freely, and was shot in the back.

DA was not called "1776", but his cornet case called "1776." He thinks Elliot Taylor [sp?] gave it this name. ET was learning clarinet about the time DA was studying cornet. DA has not heard of ET in 30 or 40 years. He moved away.

DA never knew Kid Ory or heard Kid Ory except on records. [Cf. San Antonio newspaper feature on DA, 1969.] DA and Duke Ellington are great friends through Barney Bigard, DA's cousin. He also is a good friend of Cab [Calloway] and Louis Armstrong. In 1927 or 1928, DA was responsible for bookers getting LA to San Antonio.

A flood in the '50's almost washed DA's nightclub away.

When Negro bandleaders came to S. A., they had trouble finding a place to stay. The history of the Negro band on the road is so tragic that DA sometimes hates to recall those days. When one comes to a town, the first thing to look for is the railroad track because the other side of the track is where Negroes live.

As an example of the kind of treatment which he hates to recall, DA mentions the band almost being lynched in Thomasville, Ga. Well-known Negro orchestras went through similar hardships. DA, being so light, could get food for the band. These memories are nauseating. (lc)

They thought "Hell, man, this is Heaven" when they crossed the Mason-Dixon line. However, they found more discrimination there than in the South. They didn't know "where they say your place is" as they did in the South. DA's band was one of the first Negro bands to play in some areas where they didn't want Negro bands. This was due to the fact that DA looked like a white bandleader, and once the band was booked, they played the dances. More discrimination and DA's efforts to overcome it.

In Thomasville, Ga., DA had Tom Johnson, trumpet player, and singer Buddy Collins in his band. A fight started and the band, including two girl dancers, the James Sisters, and except "Mickey" [Alvin Alcorn] and, DA thinks, [bassist] ^{Lawrence} Cato were arrested. DA was insulted and all their money was taken. They were told to leave town. One policeman snapped a revolver six times in DA's face. But then the band stopped at a service station, and the white ^{owner} ^{owner?} let them have enough gas and oil to get to Macon, Ga. on credit. DA thinks

A man at the dance started the fight with Tom Johnson. DA thinks the fight was put up by the police.

* DA to RBA, telephone conversation,
Dec. 8, 1976.]

DA is related to Dominique You. [A captain in the fleet Jean Lafitte was at the head of.] Discussion of family. His grandfather came from the Dominican Republic, as far as is known. [Confusion of St. Louis cemeteries here.] DA would like to move back to N. O. to do research on his family if he could sell his night club in San Antonio.

RBA brings up his opinion that world-wide fame does not bring success in N. O. DA met with a great response when he brought his band here, even though he was considered a Texan. He drew huge crowds at the San Jacinto [Club], the Tick Tock and the Pelican. RBA says that he thinks the fault is not with the people but with the night club owners. He thinks that race prejudice has something to do with it. In the past it was so bad here that DA dreaded coming back here. DA sees a new trend, but these sort of people are everywhere. DA discusses his battle against prejudice. He finds it in civil service. DA agrees with RBA that music has been used to fight racial problems and prejudice, and adds sports as another medium for fighting prejudice. An article by ^{Maurice} Martin Maverick [sp?], a white civil rights advocate and attorney, on DA is mentioned. [See ^{overhaul} files, ANOJ.]

DON ALBERT
Dec. 30, 1969
Reel I [of 2]

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