

IKE ROBINSON [said 15th Pallet]  
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April 28, 1961

Also present: William Russell, Ralph Collins

[Interview recorded at IR's home, 821 North Claiborne Avenue, New Orleans Louisiana]

Isaiah Robinson was born in Lafourche Parish, Louisiana (near Thibodaux), March 16, 1891. An early "string" band in that area was led by Joe Gabriel; in fact, Gabriel had two bands, and IR played in the Number Two band, while Gabriel was in the Number One band. IR has lived there [821 North Claiborne Avenue] for twenty-six years. The "string" band consisted of trombone, drums, cornet, clarinet, violin and [string] bass [no guitar? RBA]. Louis James, who grew up in the same place, knew and played in Gabriel's band. WR mentions August Lanoix, string bass, who married into some Gabriel family in that area; IR doesn't know about it. Joe Gabriel played violin, In IR's band [Gabriel Number Two]: Shiel [Achillie?] Table, trombone (IR started on guitar, which he played at the time); Bud Green, drums; Joe Bank, [or Banks? RBA] cornet; "Little Willie" [James?], clarinet; IR, guitar; Alfred Dixon, bass. (None of IR's family, except himself, played music.) In Joe Gabriel's [Number One] band: Clarence "Tit-tan" [sp?] Jules, trombone; [Aldrich?], cornet; Louis James (called "Doo Dooce"), clarinet; Joe Gabriel, violin; Neddy James, guitar; "Bourgeois," bass. IR says he left out one, Henry "Pallet" James, who played bass and clarinet; when "Tit-tan" died, Pallet began playing trombone [apparently Pallet was a relief man in the Gabriel band until the death of "Tit-tan"].

IR just picked up the knowledge to play the guitar. A fine band in that period was the Claiborne Williams band, of Donaldsonville; another band was in Napoleonville; IR recalls that Louis Hines

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[Himes, sp?] was the trombonist in it.

IR's band played in places along the Bayou Lafourche; they traveled by train or truck.

IR began playing [guitar] in a band about 1914, with the James brothers; he "picked" guitar before that, but not with a band.

The Eureka <sup>connect - from paper - connect this</sup> [sp?] Brass Band [Cf. S.B. Charters, Jazz, New Orleans, 1885-1963], of Thibodaux, was about the best brass band on the bayou; it had twelve or fourteen pieces; the band came to New Orleans and won the prize. IR was small at the time the band was going. The band played for Carnival [Mardi Gras] celebration in Thibodaux. There would be five or six floats in the Carnival parade, and two bands, the one from Thibodaux and the other from Donaldsonville.

IR began playing trombone after World War I, about 1918, while still living in Thibodaux (he moved to New Orleans in 1921); when he came to New Orleans, he studied with Dave Perkins. IR took up trombone because the trombonist in Joe Gabriel's Number Two band moved to New Orleans, and IR was given the trombone [to learn and play in the band], which belonged to the band; IR say that in those days, the bands owned the instruments. Discussion of brands of trombones; IR preferred C. G. Conn's Tone, even Martin's; Jim Robinson is mentioned in that connection. IR didn't have a teacher when he first started trombone, but he thinks a person should have a teacher when he first takes up an instrument. IR played his first job on trombone about two weeks after he began playing, but he says the band was "Hard up" for someone to fill in; he played a vamp style.

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Joe Banks [or Bank?], the cornet player, a good reader, taught him some. The band rehearsed every night, (the member had day jobs) and in about two months, IR could "make out." The band played in Thibodaux at the pavillion at the Fair Ground; the pavillion had windows. Another place was Cox's, a picnic ground where there was an open-air pavillion. Bothe places were for colored; there was a pavillion for whites on Second Street.

IR went to work for the Southern Pacific Railroad when he was about seventeen years old; he worked that job until he came to New Orleans (long enough for him to have an annual pass).

There were not many parades in the Thibodaux area; IR played a couple of parades for the Odd Fellows, a short time before he moved to New Orleans. IR remembers only two funerals with music in that area; one was for Henry Jules, son of the bass player in the brass band; the other was for Joe Comeaux [sp?], who grew up with IR and lived in New Orleans and was a pretty good trombone player.

The big difference between the music played around Thibodaux and that played in New Orleans was that the New Orleans musicians played with more of a jazz swing. The music was called jazz then, but later was called Dixieland. IR heard Joe Oliver, Freddy Keppard, Frankie Duson [and others], who called their music ragtime; those particular musicians played in the Thibodaux area.

IR was just a kid when inspired to play trombone by hearing Duson. The trombone style of the old times was different from that of today; IR says today a trombone "sings", plays the lead; in the old days, the trombone played vamp style sometimes, and sometimes played a melody

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counter to that of the lead, and sometimes played a harmony part to the lead. Duson played that way. The music was written that way. IR started playing slide trombone; Duson was playing valve trombone when IR heard him, switching to slide later on.

IR say he had good times in the early Twenties in New Orleans, and that he was playing with Chris Kelly in 1926.

Dave Perkins didn't have IR study from a book; instead, he wrote things for him, including scales. IR says the hardest thing about his studies was trying to keep time with his foot in a certain prescribed way [he demonstrates]. IR didn't continue his lessons with Perkins long, as Perkins charged one dollar per lesson, and a student had to take at least two lessons per week.

IR got in a band pretty soon after he moved to New Orleans. The first job he played was with a cornet player named Son Wilson; the band played the advertising job for the dance that night; the dance was on Conti Street. The drummer, "Cook's Shop's Son", also played kazoo; IR says it was fortunate there was a kazoo, as Wilson didn't play much cornet, and IR himself was not much on trombone. Another band he played with was led by [Rawls or Ross?], a one-eyed man; they played at a place called the Cherokee Nan, [probably Cherokee and Ann Streets; the latter is now called Garfield Street] on a Labor Day. [Ross?] could play only one tune: "Bucket's Got A Hole In It", which he played until a person from a couple of doors away said, "Why don't you tell that one-eyed nigger to knock the bottom out of the bucket?" IR finally got with a pretty good band, the Liberty Bell; some other members: "Blind Freddie" [Small], clarinet (now plays harmonica, says WR): [Eddie] "'T' Boy" [Gilmore], bass;

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a little fellow named Freddie [Wesley Dimes?], cornet; [Clarence] "Little Dad" [Vincent] (Who died last year, says WR), banjo (IR says he used a six-string banjo then); a drummer, name not remembered by IR, a little fellow from uptown. [Check Clarence Vincent reel ?].

WR asks about "Cook Shop's Son"; he says Manuel Manetta mentioned him; Manetta played with him with Bob Lyons in a little marching band. Every time Huey Long would come to town, the band would meet him at the station (Long liked Lyons) and march him to the Roosevelt Hotel. IR says the step-father of "Cook Shop's Son" was named Jessie [Jackson] a guitarist [see later, this reel]; Jessie's band was the Silver Leaf. IR says Jessie played six-string banjo then, not guitar. IR says "Cook Shop's Son" is still playing bass drum. IR asks if WR is speaking of "Black Happy" [Goldston], who plays in the Eureka Brass Band; IR says "Red Happy" [Bolton] played with Bob Lyons; WR says Red Happy played with Joe Oliver and Kid Ory, too. Red Happy, long dead, was the best drummer in the city, says, IR. IR says he is mixed up about "Cook Shop's Son", that he was the drummer who had the kazoo, that the "Son" he has been talking about is Robert "Son Fewclothes" Lewis, who is still playing bass drum with the Eureka [died 1965--PRC].

End of Reel I

[In New Orleans,] IR worked for a construction company by day; he played music at night, any night a job came up. He also played during the day if the job paid more than his construction job; he would always play at banquets, which were held during the day, although the pay was only two dollars, because the food was so good and plentiful, and he had so much fun at them. (There was also near-beer to drink--nothing stronger, as prohibition was in effect.) The banquets were held in halls, such as the Cooperators, Perseverance, New and Economy; the banquets were given by societies, as their anniversary celebrations. The banquets began at noon, and ended at five P.M.

[Alphonse] Picou [clarinet] was in the last band IR played in; Picou had a number, "Get Busy Rag", which IR scats, including the coda he would make on trombone; IR admits that he doesn't remember it very well, as the time when he played it was many years ago, and his head isn't right, his wife having died a few weeks prior to the interview. WR says he went to the wake of the wife with [George] "Sheik" [Colar], and mentions that he and RC saw Sheik as they were coming to IR's home; Sheik was on his way to George Guesnon's to try out some music. IR says Picou rearranged a couple of records [i.e., rearranged the music from phonograph records]. (At the request of WR, IR scats "Get Busy Rag" again.) IR and Picou played together between 1930 and 1932.

IR was with Chris Kelly longer than he was with anyone else. Kelly was "a pretty good ragtime cornet player." Others in the band: [Emile] "Mealy" Barnes, clarinet; Peter Papin [check sp.], banjo, and

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Lawrence Marrero, banjo; Eddie Marrero (still living), bass; [Eddie] "Face-o" [Woods], drums, and "Big [Foot] Bill Phillips, drums (among others). "Face-o", a good drummer, left New Orleans; IR didn't hear anymore about him after that. Kelly, a dark brown-skinned fellow, didn't dress very well; he was barrelhouse, the way he played. Kelly used mutes, especially a rubber plunger; his favourite [i.e., favorite? RBA] number was "Careless Love"; IR scats an imitation of Kelly using a plunger, for wa-wa effect, on tune mentioned. Kelly was a good street man, especially on advertising jobs [bands usually rode in wagons or trucks]; IR tells of a meeting between Kelly's band, including IR, and the band of Kid Rena, on South Roman [Street]; the bands had a contest which lasted from two until five [P.M.] [the contest was apparently a draw]. Kelly played music in general, but featured the blues; one he used, his own composition, was "3 Sixes" [Scatted by IR Cf. Kid Howard's band on Icon (LP-47)]. IR played Kelly's last job, which was on McDonoghville. Kelly was quite sick--short winded, bad heart. Kelly was about thirty-eight when he died; he and IR were about the same age. Kelly was from Ironton, which was a little further than Magnolia Plantation. IR then says Sunny Henry was from Magnolia Plantation (WR had mentioned it earlier), and WR says that Kelly was from Deer Range, as was Jim Robinson, and IR adds that they were all together in a little band there. WR had mentioned talking to Chris Kelly's brother, Ben Kelly. IR says Chris Kelly resembled himself, that they used to pass as brothers, that Kelly was about his height around five feet, ten inches, and husky. It is agreed that Buddy Petit and Kid Rena were small. A regular job the Kelly band had was

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at the Bulls Aid and Pleasure Club, on Eight Street; the band played there every Tuesday for about two seasons [year]. IR says he doesn't see how those people [the Bulls] lost it [the hall], because they made so much money on the dances; the place was jammed every Tuesday night; sometimes there were two bands. IR describes the layout of the hall. Chris Kelly was a nice fellow. He was hot-headed, but he could be cooled easily. Chris was a bit free with his money he would get for deposits on jobs: IR said the other musicians had to <sup>look</sup> bok out for their share of the pay, or Kelly would squander it. By then IR had no day job. Kelly played a short cornet; his instrument was in pawn when he died, so that at his funeral a crepe-draped bugle was substituted to represent his instrument. IR says he doesn't know what Kelly did with all the money he made. Three bands played for Kelly's funeral. (WR mentions Buddy Petit's funeral.) IR says it was like Carnival when Kelly was buried; IR has seen the funerals of Kelly, Black Bennie [Williams, drummer], [Papa] Celestin [trumpet], and Picou (four of the biggest funerals [with music, for musicians?] he has seen), and Kelly's was the largest. Kelly lived on Liberty Street, near where the Municipal Auditorium is now located, when he died.

IR lived at 1131 [South] Rampart when he took lessons from Dave Perkins. Perkins played with white bands (WR says he heard Perkins played with Jack "Papa" Laine sometimes); he was very light-skinned. IR moved around a little from Rampart Street; in 1921, he moved to the general area where he still livess.

IR played funerals and parades with Kelly's brass band, which would be a pick-up group.. IR says that in some cases when a well-known man "get kilt or die" [in this order], other men (Ernest French,

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Taquet [sp?], Jerry were the names of some of them) [probably friends of the deceased] would make the rounds to get donations to pay for a band for the funeral. Kelly got a lot of that type job. The regular price for a funeral then was three dollars per man, but Kelly would work for two dollars if that was all the money collected. IR says the Kelly brass band played all "head" numbers, hymns, such as "What A Friend We have With [i.e., In] Jesus", "Nearer My God To Thee", "Bye and Bye", and "Just A Closer Walk With Thee". "When the Saints Go Marching In" was popular in that time, as a coming-back-from-the-cemetery tune, the same as today. IR himself played [written] funeral marches, too; he says a person had to know how to read them if he played with the brass band of Henry Allen [Sr.], based in Algiers. IR says Chris Kelly's [favorite] tune for coming back from a funeral was "Oh, Didn't He Ramble" Kelly's brass band would [usually] have ten to twelve men including three cornet; one [Eb?] clarinet; two drums; two trombones; baritone [horn]; bass horn. Georgie Hooker usually played the baritone horn with Kelly's brass band; the preferred tuba player was an <sup>old man</sup> old man who also played with the Excelsior Brass Band, but IR can't recall his name; later he used Joe Howard on [brass] bass sometimes as he played in his orchestra also; George Lewis was Kelly's preferred clarinetist; Kelly liked to have Clay Jiles (of Thibodaux, and known to IR in that town) play bass drum. IR speaks of the Jiles family; another drummer; Albert Jiles, Sr., played in the bands in Thibodaux, where he died; his son [Albert Jiles, Jr.] plays drums in New Orleans today [died 1964?].

IR sometimes played as an extra [i.e., substitute?] in Buddy Petit's band; when Petit died, he was playing second trumpet in

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Ernest ["Kid"] Milton's band, with whom he worked occasionally. Petit was to have played a job with Milton's band in [Burwood, Berwick?] one Saturday; he didn't go because he felt bad that morning; when the band returned, he had died. His good friend, Louis Armstrong, was in town then [playing at the Suburban Garden--1931], who acted as a pallbearer or honorary pallbearer at Petit's funeral. Petit was a fine second cornet player; he had plenty of ideas about playing harmony; he gave Armstrong many ideas, when Armstrong was here. Armstrong used to play in the streets down here. WR says Armstrong played with the [Original] Tuxedo Brass Band, he thinks.

Having mentioned earlier that Frankie Duson was [his inspiration to play trombone] a favorite trombonist of his, IR says Morris French, who played with Kid Rena, was another favorite. Another favorite was the trombonists, unnamed, who played with [Jimmy "Kid"] Clayton [trumpet].

IR also played with the dance band of "Wooden Joe" Nicholas, who had a strong lip; IR says Nicholas could take a brass band on the street by himself [i.e., as the only trumpet player]. In the band: Nicholas, cornet; IR, trombone; Israel <sup>F. Gorman</sup> Gordon, clarinet; Lucky (who lived in Carrollton), bass; Arthur Ogle [drums].

End of Reel II

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Continuing to name the men in the band of "Wooden Joe" [Nicholas, which included IR--see Reel II]: Arthur Ogle, drummer; John Smith, banjo. "Buddy Luck" was the bass player [called "Lucey" on Reel II]. The band played mostly spot jobs; the place they played the longest time was the Merry-go-round [pleasure club's hall], at Hickory and Eagle [streets], where they played every Monday night for about two seasons. IR played in street bands with Nicholas, who was a very powerful cornet player. WR mentions that Nicholas made some recordings for him. IR says Nicholas was strictly an ear man. IR mentions meeting Punch [Miller] and his band in contests, when Nicholas's band and Punch's band were both playing advertising jobs. IR mentions having some records made by Bunk [Johnson]. IR himself never recorded. WR mentions that Chris Kelly and Buddy Petit never recorded; Punch recorded after he left New Orleans, [Cf. discographies. RBA] as did Louis Armstrong. WR says Henry ["Kid"] Rena recorded about 1940, when his lip was not in the best condition; IR agrees that he was a bit off. IR says he thinks Chris Kelly had a better swing than Rena. IR mentions "Careless Love"; he demonstrates the tempo at which Kelly played the tune. IR says that when Kid Howard first began playing trumpet, he played exactly like Kelly, but Howard changed his style through the years; IR says maybe Howard ruined his lip imitating Louis Armstrong and others. IR agrees that Howard started as a drummer, and says he was pretty good. IR mentions someone named "Buzoo". Kelly didn't play many high notes; he ~~Buddy Petit~~ was a fine second cornet player; he didn't play high notes; he could play harmony. IR says George Washington played trombone with Petit; he was good; he died soon after Petit. Kelly didn't use music much; his band would play only the special chorus on the

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stock arrangement; then they would improvise on that. Petit didn't use music much, not even when he played with [Ernest "Kid"] Milton. The public did not like [written] music.

Discussion of the various roles the various wind instruments play in a jazz band.

WR mentions [Frankie] Duson and [Morris] French. IR says [Willie] Cornish, another trombonist, wasn't much; he made allot of noise. WR mentions Kid Ory and Roy Palmer; IR says they both left town before he moved here. Trombonist Ernest [Kelly], who worked with Bob Lyons, was good; Foster [Lewis] was another good one for jazz; IR says if he isn't dead, he is still playing, [but] in church. IR knew Earl Humphrey, trombonist, who was pretty good. "In fact, all them Humphreys is pretty good musicians."

IR says that when a "humbug" [i.e., disturbance] would begin at a place where Chris Kelly was playing, he would play a lowdown blues, such as [his own] "3 Sixes", to break up the disturbance; he had to do that many times at the Economy Hall, which was a rough place. IR thinks the Cooperators Hall was rougher. IR thinks he played, with Chris Kelly, the last dance held at the New Hall (Derbigny between Allen and New Orleans [streets]). IR tells of the humbug there, which involved a small policeman and a large customer named "Stack o' Dollars". New Hall is now rented to tenants [as apartments?]. He thinks caused the end of dances there. [IR scats "3 Sixes"]. Chris Kelly wrote and sang the tune, which had words, too. IR sings "... you dirty...."

Kelly, Rena, Punch and others were the jazz trumpet players around New Orleans. IR gives "Sonny [i.e., Papa]" Celestin credit for being a

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good trumpet player, but says Celestin always had someone else in his band to play the jazz on trumpet. Celestin had Guy Kelly playing hot trumpet with him for a long time (WR says Kelly went to Chicago, made some records). WR says Celestin had "Shots" [Madison] with him a while, too. "He had all good men."

"Bebé" Ridgley, who was [partner] with Celestin at first, was a good trombone player; when he and Celestin split, Ridgley formed his own band. [Cf. Bebe' Ridgley reel and other interviews]. WR saw Ridgley at the funeral of [Alphonse] Picou; IR last saw him at the Merry-go-round, where Ridgley played a few numbers for IR. WR thinks Ridgley hasn't played for a long time now. IR quit playing when he took a job in a warehouse; he was married by that time; he worked for the warehouse for eighteen to twenty years, then retired. He didn't take up music again. IR says music didn't pay enough in his time. Ten dollars was the top price when he played. He talks of the long hours required in playing the Mardi Gras parade of the Jefferson City Buzzards; the parade began at six A.M. and ended at dark. IR mentions playing another Mardi Gras parade, another club, with Joe Nicholas; club members were angry when drummer Arthur Ogle arrived five or ten minutes late for the start, scheduled for seven A.M.

IR played with the Olympia Band, a pretty good reading dance band, managed by drummer Arnold DePass. Others: IR, (he says cornet) [trombone]; Elmer "Coo Coo" Talbert, cornet; Eddie ["Big Head"?] Johnson, sax; Eugene ["Benny"?] Benoit, banjo; sometimes, Alphonse Picou, clarinet; Thomas Copeland, bass; Edna Francis [wife of drummer Albert Francis], piano. IR was with the band three or four years; the time was after the death of Chris Kelly, going with DePass about 1929. IR remembers that

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he played with DePass during the depression which broke up the band later.

IR played in the W.P.A. Band for a while.

IR wasn't with Ernest Milton when Buddy Petit paaayed with Milton. IR joined Milton about 1933 or 1934; Petit died in 1931. IR was with Wilton about three or four years. Music jobs were scarce and paid little at the time. IR tells of bidding for a music job to play for some jewelry store where a lottery was run; he bid one dollar, but was undercut by Joe Nicholas, [Emile] "Mealy" Barnes and others, who took the job for six-bits [i.e., seventy-five cents]; IR decided it was time to quit playing music, because of the low pay. IR began working a couple of days a week for a contractor; he later got a job with Douglas Warehouse. He gave his trombone to his nephew.

End of Reel III