

Theodore Purnell  
Reel I  
February 3, 1961

Draft: Paul R. Crawford  
Check: Richard B. Allen  
Retype: Kay L. Wicker  
Date Completed: July 16, 1977

Also Present: William Russell  
Ralph Collins  
Harold Dejan  
Mrs. Purnell

(Interview recorded at 1930 Clouet Street, New Orleans.)

Theodore Nathaniel Purnell was born in March, 1908 in New Orleans; he thinks he is two or three years older than his brother, [pianist] Alton Purnell, the only other member of his family who plays or played music. TP's first instrument was piano, <sup>which he began</sup> when he was a little boy, but "I didn't learn a thing; I didn't like no piano." TP then took up trumpet, but he got headaches from blowing it; his teacher, "Fess" {Professor [Paul] Chaligny}, advised him to take up clarinet, which he did at the age of about twelve years. Harold Dejan said he himself had had his clarinet about three years when TP got his; HD also studied with Chaligny, and knew TP; HD studied with Chaligny until [Lorenzo] Tio [Jr.] returned from New York. After he began playing engagements, TP continued studying with Chaligny, who considered TP so good on his instrument that he wanted to send him to California [to study?]. Barney [Bigard] and Albert Nicholas were still in New Orleans then. TP's first job on clarinet was with "Gossoon" [Phillips], a banjo player who now works at Pete Herman's in the French Quarter. ~~TP was~~

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TP was still in his teens at the time. HD says he helped TP with his clarinet studies, but TP "passed him like a lightning striking" [in technique]. TP switched [from Albert system clarinet] to Boehm system clarinet when he was playing on the boat [?] with Eugene Porter, tenor sax and clarinet. TP noticed that Porter played most passages with an ease which TP couldn't obtain. TP then decided to get a Boehm system clarinet. HD says he and others [Clarence Desdune's band?] brought Porter from Jackson, Mississippi to New Orleans, and that although Porter knew nothing about playing clarinet at the beginning, he became very adept in about two weeks. TP began playing saxophone when he was working with <sup>drummer</sup> Bill Phillips. Lucien Johnson, the alto sax player, couldn't play "In A Little Spanish Town" at a fast fox trot tempo, so TP was asked to try it; TP, playing only clarinet at the time, was able to play the song on alto sax, which he has been playing ever since. WR says the song mentioned came out about 1926. HD was playing at the Japanese Tea Garden <sup>in</sup> ~~at~~ Milneburg when the song came out. He could read, so a non-reading saxophone player named Hickman asked him to play it over so he could learn it. HD was working in a band with Louis Gallaud [piano], "Siu" [sp?], [violin], and "Big Foot Bill"

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[Phillips, drums]. Hickman was playing at the place next door to the Japanese Tea Garden. HD says the song must have come out in the early twenties.

TP left Lucien Johnson to <sup>j</sup>oin Bill Phillips. He left Phillips to join Herbert Morand; he left Morand to join Kid Howard; from Howard he went with Chris Kelly; his next job was with [Kid] Clayton; leaving Clayton, he joined the band at the [taxi dance hall], La Vida. TP made the recordings with Lee Collins [Jones-Collins *during the 2 year period* Astoria Hot Eight] when they were working at the Astoria, ~~where they worked for about two years.~~ The recordings were made at Italian Hall, on Espanade; TP thinks they made five or six sides; WR says only four side were ever released. TP says Joe Strother was the drummer on the records; HD remarks that Strother was well-known for playing waltz melodies on a slide whistle; WR says [Abbey] "Chinee" [Foster] recorded "Careless Love" on slide whistle with [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin [i.e., with the Original Tuxedo Jazz Band]. Strother wasn't the regular drummer with the band at the Astoria; HD mentions Judge Riley, who didn't ever play with that band; TP says Roy Evans was the regular drummer; HD says Evans used to play with Sam Morgan; Evans was a very steady beat. Other men on the Jones-Collins recording dates

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were Joe Robichaux [piano]; Albert Morgan [bass]; Sidney Arodin [clarinet]; Davy Jones [tenor sax]; Lee Collins [trumpet]; and, (TP thinks), Manuel Sayles [banjo]. RC says Sayles told him he was on two of the sides, but couldn't record one of the days of the session; TP says he's pretty sure the session required more than one day. [Cf. discographies. RBA.] Danny Barker is mentioned. Arodin didn't play with the band except for the recordings. TP played alto sax on the recordings; there was no use of clarinet in the band which played at the Astoria; both the sax players used soprano saxes [as doubles in the clarinet register]. Arodin was added to the recording band at the request of the recording director. Some of the tunes had written arrangements. TP and HD agree that Davy Jones was a wonderful musician as well as soprano and tenor sax player. TP says the band was good. Their six-piece band was not afraid to compete with any other band, regardless of size. Lee Collins had a strong lip. TP worked with Collins later, at Steve Valenti's Paddock [Lounge]; in the band were: Alfred Williams, drums; [Worthia] "Showboy" [Thomas], trombone; Collins, trumpet; TP, clarinet and sax; Snookum Russell or Octave [Crosby] (alternating), piano; Ricard Alexis, bass. HD says Collins was a powerful trumpet player, like Manuel Perez; TP says he could hit high

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notes consistently. The Astoria band went on an excursion ~~to Chicago~~ <sup>to Chicago</sup> in 1930 ~~to Chicago~~ (date supplied by Mrs. Purnell, who says she and TP had just married). Louis [Armstrong] played [i.e., sat in] with the band for several numbers; the two trumpets were strong and high. The Astoria band played several dates in Chicago on that excursion.

3:10 Chris Kelly was a great blues player; HD mentions his using a toilet flusher as a mute. [TP worked with CK?]

TP worked a short time with trumpet player Buddy Petit; Petit didn't have a high range, but he could play great music in his range.

TP played with another good trumpet player, Kid Keiffer [sp?], who went to Chicago long before the Depression; HD says Louis Prima <sup>learned</sup> a lot from Keiffer [sp?], sitting in with him at the Entertainers. Keiffer [sp?] was about the same age as TP and HD. TP and HD agree that KK came from Bay St. Louis [Mississippi]; Edgar Saucier, another good sax player and now in California, the son of August [Saucier], was also from that town.

TP joined Sidney Desvigne in Peoria, Illinois, says his wife, playing on the steamer Capital. SD <sup>asked him</sup> sent ~~for him~~ to join his band. TP also played with [A. J.] Piron, and with Celestin. TP worked the boat with Desvigne for eight or ten years; he then joined Walter

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Pichon's band, which went on tour with Mamie Smith, playing vaudeville shows. Some of the Pichon band members were: ["H.E."?] [Minor - RBA], Allen Huntley (check name), Gardette [trumpet?]; Raymond Brown, trumpet; Chester Zardis, bass; George Clark, tenor sax; a boy from across the river who played good trombone ([Manuel] "Fess" [Manetta] could name him, says HD), but doesn't play anymore (HD says he'll probably see him when he plays across the river soon with the [Young] Tuxedo [Brass Band.]). Another good trombone player from across the river was ~~Elmer DeRoux~~ DeRoux [sp?], now dead, whose brother still plays trumpet. TP played with the trombonist DeRoux in a band with no trumpet, but none was needed, as DeRoux played the trumpet parts on his instrument. [Cf. Dolly Adams, reel ?] Mamie Smith sounded good when Pichon's band toured with her. Pichon wrote arrangements for her songs. She sang blues; her voice was big, not too high.

The first recordings TP made were with the Jones-Collins band. His next recordings were with "Smiling Joe" [real name, Pleasant Joseph]. He recorded with a Navy band during World War II. TP was stationed at the lake front, with HD's brother [Leo Dejan?]. HD was stationed at the Navy repair base [in Algiers]. The Navy band was one of the best ones TP ever played with.

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TP tells of joining some Navy band; he mentions [Alvin?  
Allen?] "Fat" Walls, a [Navy?] bandleader. He preferred  
playing third to first sax as the third saxophonist "got  
off" [i.e., played more jazz? RBA].

End of Reel I





Theodore Purnell  
Reel II  
February 3, 1961

Draft: Paul R. Crawford  
Check: Richard B. Allen  
Retype: Kay L. Wicker  
Date Completed: July 18, 1977

Also Present: William Russell  
Ralph Collins  
Harold Dejan  
Mrs. Purnell

TP continues [from Reel I] his story of joining a Navy band. Admiral [Chester] Nimitz was due to arrive in San Francisco. TP sight-read the band's first sax book. The theme song was written by [~~Cary? Perry?~~ Carey Lavigne]. Levine. A trumpet player named Grimes was the leader. TP played one difficult number which had been featured [recorded?] by Johnny Hodges [in Duke Ellington's orchestra?]. When the regular first sax player, [Alvin? Allen?] "Fat" Wall returned, he and TP alternated. TP was kept in the Navy three or four months longer than he was supposed to stay because he was so good that the captain [of the base?] wanted him to play in the band for his parties. TP was in the Navy three and a half years.

HD was in charge of a Dixieland band in the Navy; he didn't play anything he didn't have to play. He would get out of being transferred by not playing much until the office or chief [petty officer] who wanted to take him with him had been transferred. Then he would play well and a lot again.

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The second Navy band TP played with was the best he ever played with in his life. It consisted of six saxes, four trumpets, two trombones [ans usual rhythm?].

HD says some good saxophone players around New Orleans when TP was growing up were Early Foucher, Paul Barnes and Albert Nicholas (clarinet and alto sax). Barney Bigard was playing tenor sax then. Eddie Cherrie, a barber, was also good, says HD. TP says all the sax players then were good, which is the reason he became so good, as he learned from them. HD says one of the best alto sax players in the country right now is Warren Bell. Bell wanted to study with HD, but he didn't have enough patience, so he took him to TP. HD says Bell plays more than Charlie Parker did. TP taught a lot of good players, mostly clarinet players.

The clarinet players TP liked in his youth were "Big Eye" Louis [Nelson], [Lorenzo] Tio [Jr.] and Willie [J.] Humphrey [the last two suggested by HD]. HD also mentions [Albert] Burbank. TP's favorite clarinetist was "Cap" [John] Handy. TP says he came to New Orleans from Baton Rouge [Handy was born and reared in Pass Christian, Mississippi--PRC. Cf. JH, Reel ?--RBA.] HD says Handy was playing at the Hummingbird when TP <sup>he</sup> and himself were youngsters. HD would go with Lorenzo

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Tio to his job with [A.J.] Piron's band at Tranchina's [Restaurant] for experience. Tio would bring him back to the Hummingbird for breakfast, where they would listen to Handy play. Handy began playing alto sax on a job with Kid Harris (TP played with him some) in Bay St. Louis or Pass Christian. HD was on that job, playing sax. Handy would play difficult parts on clarinet, but was following the easier parts on sax. He became so good on sax that he quit playing clarinet.

5:10        TP mentions playing with Smiling Joe at the Famous Door; TP was well then. [Cf. photographs in Ralston Crawford Collection. RBA] TP has been playing again for only about two years [after suffering a stroke]. HD says TP never copied anyone on alto sax. He says tenor sax player Bill Casimir never copied anyone, either.

TP worked one night at the Little Club, on Bourbon Street, with [A.J.] Piron's band. He substituted for one of the sax players, who was sick. Joe Rouzan [sp?] and perhaps Earl Pierson (Eddie Pierson is mentioned, but he was a trombone player) were playing sax. TP says the band was too timid for him, as Piron kept the band soft and sweet. TP liked the theme song, "Purple Rose of Cairo," of Piron's band. WR says Peter Bocage has just recorded the number, playing both violin and trumpet, for Riverside.

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HD says Gene Ware and Lionel Ferbos were good trumpet players. TP says Ware could read anything, even from a distance.

TP worked only a few dates with Piron; he didn't like the band.

5:32 TP's favorite of the bands he worked with was the twelve-piece band Sidney [Desvigne] had. The theme song, "Congo Madness," was written by Rene Hall, who played violin, banjo and guitar. He later played trombone with Ernie Fields. He lives in California now. Homer Eugene replaced Hall on guitar in Desvigne's band [Eugene also plays trombone. PRC]. WR says Eugene recorded with Bocage recently [the Riverside date]. TP says he played with Bocage's Creole Serenaders for a long time. TP played with Kid Harris, from across the river, for a long time; Harris didn't play very much [i.e., in a creative manner], but he could play the melody. HD says Harris wouldn't be reading all the time, as sometimes the music would be upside down. TP would play with anyone who could play fairly well.

TP says HD would take off from his job at the Popeye [on Decatur Street] so that TP could substitute for him. HD mentions Walter Pichon. The first time TP worked on Bourbon Street was substituting for HD at the [Old French] Opera House. Joe [Robichaux?], who was working across the

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street, heard TP at the Opera House, invited him to sit in on his job. The man[ager?] wanted to hire TP on the spot. The operator of the Popeye complained to HD, who was very popular at the place, that he took off from the job too often. HD told him that if he, HD, could play like TP he wouldn't be working at the Popeye anyway. TP and HD had just gotten out of the [armed] service when HD went to work on Bourbon Street, giving TP some substitute work in his place. [John] Handy left the job HD took to go to the Silver Slipper. Paul Moliere and Sammy Hopkins got HD to replace Handy. HD got a raise of one dollar per night for the first three or four nights because he was able to read and play "Rose of Washington Square" to accompany the owner's wife in a special number. HD was making twelve dollars [per night], double the scale of \$6.00, by the end of his first month on the job. When HD couldn't get TP to substitute for him, he sent his [own] brother-in-law, Tom Johnson, who played clarinet and alto sax also. Johnson is now on the West Coast. When he went there, no one wanted an alto sax player, as they preferred tenors. Johnson refused to change; now alto sax players are at a premium there, around Berkeley [California].

TP has played all the saxophones, but prefers alto. HD says TP was a fine baritone sax player.

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TP plays "Purple Rose of Cairo" on alto sax. He says [A.J.] Piron [wrote it], WR says he thinks Steve Lewis wrote it. [Cf. sheet music. RBA] TP says he himself played with [Piron?] on the boat; the pianist was Sadie [Goodson], one-time wife of [Abbey] "Chinee" [Foster], sister of Billie Pierce. Sadie was a much better piano player than her sister. HD says there was another piano playing Sadie in New Orleans. She was from St. Louis. Sadie [Goodson?] was as good as the woman pianist, Vivian, whom the [Clarence] Desdune band employed from Atchison, Kansas. Sadie sounded as masculine on piano as Udell [Wilson?] or Walter Pichon. Sadie played on the steamer Madisonville with HD and Ruben [sp?] McClendon and others. McClendon, who doesn't play anymore, was good playing banjo, guitar, or piano.

TP has been sick since the last part of 1954. His doctor tells him to play, but he plays only fifteen minutes or so each day. His jaw becomes tired. He will not [ever?] play any more jobs. HD says TP played a couple of numbers at a [recent?] union banquet.

6:33        Talk of Sidney Desvigne's band, which was a great one, says TP. The theme of the band, "Congo Madness," is mentioned again.

Theodore Purnell  
Reel III  
February 3, 1961

Draft: Paul R. Crawford  
Check: Richard B. Allen  
Retype: Kay L. Wicker  
Date Completed: July 19, 1977

Also present: William Russell  
Ralph Collins  
Harold Dejan

[Pianists] "Plutsom" and "Little Willie" are mentioned. TP says "Plutsom" taught his brother [Alton Purnell] how to play. TP recalls that Sidney [Desvigne] needed a piano player <sup>at</sup> one time, so he hired TP's brother. TP objected, saying he couldn't play. Sidney persisted, saying that he was a good chord player. TP says his brother has a good voice, too. HD recalls his singing "A Chicken Ain't Nothin' But A Bird." TP says his brother once "had Bourbon Street tied up."

[Al?] Guichard, clarinet and sax, is mentioned. HD says his brother, Leo [Dejan], called Guichard "Little Paul Barnes," as Paul Barnes was a great sax player at the time. When [Guichard?] was with Joe Robichaux [up on the Paradise?], TP would listen to them on his off nights. Guichard had two strokes when still young.

TP played two parades in his career as he was so busy. His first was with Paul Barbarin, a nine-hour affair for the Square Deal [Club]. The second was the next day, Labor Day, a short parade with Barbarin again. TP didn't play anymore parades after that, except when

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he was in the Navy. Talk of Navy parades, which are different from New Orleans brass band parades in that tempos are strict and faster, only marches are played, and music is always used. Willie [J.] Humphrey played first clarinet to TP's second in the Navy band. Earl Joseph played solo clarinet. HD's brother-in-law, Tom Johnson, played third clarinet. In the Navy band in California, Alvin [Wall?] played first [clarinet?], TP played second. When Alvin went away, TP replaced him. TP was told at the time of his discharge that he should rest. He says he was sick even then, but didn't know it. He got out of the Navy and went to work, playing every night. TP says he worked every night during the Depression, too, as various people, including HD, would give him jobs. HD says he himself didn't feel the effects of the Depression, as he worked every night, too.

HD mentions Cyril August, a good sax player. August, now dead, pawned a tenor sax HD loaned him. August said he didn't have food to take home to his family, so he pawned the instrument for that purpose. HD, then working at the Cotton Club on Jefferson Highway, told him he could have substituted for him to earn some money. TP says August was a good alto sax player.

HD says the best alto sax players were TP and Son Johnson. TP agrees that Johnson was great. HD says



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Johnson played so well that sometimes the audience would stop dancing just to listen to him. Johnson also played piano and clarinet well. [TP taught Johnson?] TP says Johnson had exceptional breath control, and was able to play extremely long passages.

When TP taught, he had beginners start with Burbank's [probably Rubank. PRC] elementary method.

HD mentions Professor [Paul] Chaligny's handwritten theory book. [Apparently] each student received one of the books as part of his lessons. The lessons cost 25¢ each. Chaligny advocated a morning hot toddy for wind instrumentalists, on the theory that the toddy would help them with their wind. Chaligny had HD, a clarinet student, learn trumpet from his brother, Leo Dejan, and vice versa. TP mentions trumpet player Albert Snaer, a student of Chaligny. Snaer, a powerful player, went to New York years ago, even before Red Allen, and played with Lucky Millinder's band [among others]. [Cf. discographies. RBA]

HD was playing at a place at Rampart and Iberville when he was 13 years old. He was then studying with [Lorenzo] Tio [Jr.]. HD would ask him how a certain tune was played, so that he could use it that night on his job. Tio didn't know HD was working.

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TP and HD agree that young music students of today don't study long enough before taking music jobs. HD says he studied clarinet two years before his professor, [William?] Nickerson, allowed him to play a tune. The professor found "Stumbling" in HD's music case before he was allowed to play tunes, so he told HD's father about it, telling him there was plenty of time for that later. When a student was ready, Nickerson would add him to the little student band. When they assembled, he would have his daughter, Camille Nickerson, a great pianist, play piano with the band.

TP says there were nothing but good musicians in the earlier days. Caffrey Darensbourg, banjo player, is mentioned. HD says that when Caffrey was playing at the [Pythian Temple] Roof Garden with Manuel Perez, Caffrey could duplicate any solo copied by Perez, who could copy solos played by Eddie Cherrie on clarinet in that band. TP says all the old-time trumpet players could read. HE mentions Maurice Durand. TP says that when he was coming up, a person couldn't get in a band unless he could read. [!!! RBA] HD says he himself was hired at the Japanese Tea Garden [Milneburg] because he could read. He says the band with Hickman [sax?] in it, which played next door, would almost always be finished by 11 o'clock every night except on

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weekends. Hickman couldn't read; HD could, but couldn't play jazz. He could play the melody, however, and that apparently made the band he played with quite popular, as the Tea Garden stayed open late every night.

TP got the nickname "Wiggles," or "Mr. Wiggles" because he couldn't keep still when playing. The name was given to him when he was playing on the boat with Sidney Desvigne. Ransom [Knowling], bass player with that band, gave him the name. Knowling played string bass and sousaphone.

Two drummers TP likes are Louis Barbarin, brother of Paul Barbarin, and "Black" Alfred Williams. Louis Barbarin now plays with [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin's old band. Another good drummer was Judge Riley. TP says he played really well with Sidney Desvigne's band. HD mentions contests held between bands. His band was playing on the steamer Dixie at the time [coastal to New York]. Another band which played in a particular contest was called the Alley Cats. HD's band was known as Duke Dejan and his Dixieland Serenaders. Judge Riley played some with HD's band. Riley also played bass, says TP.

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TP plays ["On The] Sunny Side [of the Street"] on alto sax.

4:05       Talk of instruments. HD says the second sax he ever bought, one he still has for use on parades, was paid for out of tips he received while working at the Japanese Tea Garden. He kept his first horn only one week.

Talk of HD's brother, Leo Dejan, a good trumpet player. HD tells about a contest at the [Pythian Temple?] Roof Garden featuring six bands. Leo was in the Sunny South Band then. Trumpet player Alvin McNeil usually played a solo on "Ring Dem Bells" as the contest number for the Sunny South. Trumpet player [Red?] Watson is mentioned. Leo Dejan took about ten choruses on "St. Louis Blues," astounding his brother.

End of Reel III