

ALBERT JILES  
I [of 2]--Digest--Retyped  
June 15, 1960

Also present: William Russell  
Ralph Collins  
Interview held at 1816 Onzaga Street

Albert Jiles was born in Thibodaux, Louisiana, on November 27, 1905. AJ's grandfather was a drummer in the Civil War, probably for the Union Army; AJ remembers him but doesn't remember talking with him very much; his name was Napoleon Jiles. [See Albert Jiles, reel? February 24, 1961] AJ doesn't think he ever played in any dance band. AJ's father was Albert Jiles, Sr.; he died when AJ was about five years old, in his late thirties; AJ remembers seeing his father set up his drums for him, when he was very young; AJ was too little and couldn't do much; AJ thinks his interest in drums was a family trait; all four of his uncles were drummers also; Clay Jiles, Oscar Jiles, Olivier Jiles and Major Jiles were all brothers of his father's; they all lived in Thobodaux [See below]; AJ's father played in a brass band in Thibodaux, which was organized by Joe Gabriel; AJ is related to Lewis James, who was in that same band also. AJ doesn't remember his uncles playing in any brass band in Thibodaux, but they did play in brass bands in New Orleans; after they moved down here. Clay Jiles played with the Excelsior Brass Band; Oscar Jiles played with the Onward Jazz Band [probably Onward Brass Band], as did Oliver [sic] Jiles; Oscar played bass drum, Oliver the snare drum; Major played mostly around Thibodaux. AJ's father's drums were sort of a regular dance band drum set, but little different from the way they are set up now. AJ's father had made his own foot pedal, he didn't have an overhead foot pedal; it was made in a trap form out of wood [i.e., similar to the foot pedal of today, 1965. RBA]; he had Chinese crash cymbal, and blocks and cow bells, in addition to the regular snare and bass drums; the bells on AJ's drum set are orchestra bells. AJ isn't using his father's old drum set; his mother had given it away; it was a "New Leader" set; he bought his own.

AJ was sixteen years old when he moved to New Orleans, and he started really playing the drums at age seventeen. He moved in with his grandmother and his uncle Oscar. He worked for the Crescent Steam Pottery Works for nine dollars a week. He was interested in playing the drums and wanted to buy a set of drums. His uncle Oscar took him to a pawn shop on Rampart Street and Poydras, and AJ bought a set of drums for twenty-five dollars. His uncle Clay Jiles then took him to [Paul] Chaligny, who gave lessons in music. Chaligny believed in teaching music through experience, i.e., he had a big band of all of his students. AJ would have his lesson on Mondays, and on Wednesday all the students would have band rehearsal together. Clay Jiles used to demonstrate the bass drum for the students. AJ played snare drums in the band, and there were from ten to twenty snare drums in the band. Chaligny could pick out any student who made a mistake, no matter what instrument he played; he would stop the whole band and make the delinquent repeat it; he would hum the beats so the drummer could get it straight. Chaligny taught at his own home on St. Claude [Avenue], and the band rehearsed at St. Katherine's Hall on Tulane Avenue; he lived on St. Claude near St. Philip. He charged twenty-five cents per lesson. AJ believes that Chaligny was one of the greatest teachers that ever existed. Chaligny was too old to play when he taught AJ; he used to play the trumpet and hearsay had it that he has his own brass band in his day.

Clay Jiles, according to AJ, was the best drummer of the brothers, next to his father, who, as his contemporaries such as Lewis James can attest, was an excellent drummer; Albert Jiles, Sr. was also a comedian and played in shows; he was a great buck dancer; buck dancing is something like tap

dancing, but without taps on the shoes, i.e., soft-shoe dancing. AJ doesn't remember any of the names of the shows his father was in; it was vaudeville, though; he never liked to travel with the shows; he played in New Orleans mostly; he played with brass bands in New Orleans; he played with the old Onward Band for Carnival, Labor Day for the Longshoremen; all kinds of brass band jobs with several bands. In Thibodaux Joe Gabriel's band was an orchestra; Gabriel played the violin; but if a brass band was needed, they would transform into a brass band; Gabriel would direct it. WR would like to know what the dance bands sounded like in Thibodaux, when AJ was young. AJ replies that the Gabriel orchestra sounded like A.J. Piron's band; WR remarks that there exist some records of the Piron band, so it's easy to get some sort of an idea of the sound. It was a band of about eight pieces; they would play any kind of music, waltzes, quadrilles, blues, stock music [i.e., stock arrangements]; they would always arrange it to some extent according to their own taste; they played the "St. Louis Blues," a blues called ["Poor Alley Hole"], "High Society", about the same kind of music Piron used to play; a lot of the music was played by ear.

Clay Miles played with the Excelsior Brass Band, and with most of the Brass Bands around; he was a good drummer and very much in demand. John Robichaux, who was said to be the first to play bass drum in New Orleans, quit it after Clay Jiles came to New Orleans. AJ doesn't know where Robichaux came from originally; WR thought he had heard that Robichaux came from Thibodaux, but AJ doesn't know anything about it, he just knows that Robichaux came from some country town in Louisiana. Musicians used to play in many

different bands in these days, as there were more jobs and less musicians then. Clay Jiles never played dances, he just played in brass bands; his uncles didn't play dances either; only his father played in a dance band; all of AJ's uncles moved to New Orleans. His uncle Clay was the best known of them and also the best drummer excepting A.J., Sr.

When AJ took lessons from Chaligny, it was only on the snare drum. At the lessons he would use a drum pad, but with the band he'd play a real drum. Answering WR, AJ demonstrates with his foot how Chaligny taught him to count. He says every musician must have some way of counting, either with their legs, or humming, or tapping their foot; a drummer keeps time with the bass drum, no matter what he does with the snare drum. AJ took lessons from Chaligny for about two years. AJ says you can only learn the music, but the idea and the feeling have to come from yourself, and that's what makes you either a good or bad musician. Some have it and some don't; he thinks his talent runs in the family, and he can already see it repeating itself in his two little grandsons.

AJ started a small band with Lawrence Randall who was a nephew of "Wooden Joe" Nicholas; Randal played trumpet and had taken a few lessons from his uncle. The band had John Ancar in it, a fellow named Gilbert, a banjo player by the name of Bush; they would rehearse twice a week; his fellow bandsmen didn't have enough courage to really go out and play; AJ felt that he was the strongest member of the band; when somebody told AJ about a job the band might get for the Carnival season, they didn't want to take it; they didn't think they played well enough. Then AJ met Lawrence Toca [Martin] who was the nephew of Ambruce [Powers], the trombone player. AJ formed a band with Toca, Melvin

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Frank, Bill Hamilton on banjo, and they rehearsed for a while. Then a piano player named Herman got him and Toca (on trumpet) a job for a house party [or lawn party]. At that time there were a lot of house and lawn party with short combinations, three or four-piece groups. The party was given by a Mrs. Fannella, whose son, Lionel Torregano, was a drummer; he fell ill and has stopped playing since then. This was AJ's first job; the pay was two dollars and fifty cents per player. The following week Mrs. Fannella got Chris Kelly's band, and AJ decided he could learn from listening to a good band and went to the party; on his way to the party he met Chris Kelly and "Face-O" [Eddie Woods]. Face-O asked AJ to help carry his drum, so AJ told him he was learning to play the drums himself. After they had played a few numbers at the party, Face-O said, "How's about restin' me up?" which was the expression they used for "sitting in" in those days. Chris Kelly liked AJ's playing and gave him a job for the next evening, with Peter Papin (bj); and Georgie Boy[d] on clarinet; the job was on Iberville and Marais; Chris Kelly had a job at Cooperator's Hall and another one at Economy Hall at the same time; he was very popular then; so he sent Face-O with some musicians to one of the jobs and got another band for another job, and Kelly played the job with AJ. WR interjects a question about Face-O. AJ thinks Face-O was a remarkable drummer; he admired him a lot; he was so good with the blocks, and rim shots and played a perfect roll; he was a "natural-born drummer." At this party where they played there were a lot of Jamaicans; at that time great numbers of them came to New Orleans, mostly without passports, jumping off ships, etc. Lawrence Toca had followed AJ to the party, to listen and see how it worked out, and after a while Kelly asked Toca to rest him up.

End of Reel I

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A short time after that, the police raided the place, arrested all the Jamaicans without passports, and sent them back to Jamaica. That's how the song "I'm Going Home to Jamaica" [West Indies Blues] originated. [The tune existed before, but they put those words to it after this event. Check this. Compare lyrics. RBA. From then on Chris Kelly featured this tune]. The hostess liked Lawrence Toca [Martin], who was quite a musician for being so young, and he and AJ got more jobs with her, and in a way stole them from Chris Kelly. AJ played with Chris Kelly a lot after that, on advertising truck jobs, "tailgate" music. AJ can't begin to count all the jobs he has had. He played with Kid Rena; Kid's brother Joe Rena was a drummer, but he had trouble with his feet, he was very heavy, and so AJ occasionally substituted for him. The first steady job he had with Bill Hamilton and Lawrence Toca was out in Milneburg; they'd play out there every night; the place was wide-open then; the train taking them there was called "Smokey Mary"; they played there for about two years, in a nightclub owned by a man named John Barret [spelling?], but not on the water. There were about thirteen bands there in camps on the water; it was a great time for musicians. Most jobs there were weekends only.

AJ played with Buddy Petit some, after BP had come back to New Orleans. Buddy Petit had left New Orleans for a while, went to Bunkie, Louisiana and other places around there, then he stayed in Mandeville for a while, and finally came back to New Orleans, where he died soon thereafter [1931]. AJ says he was one of the finest trumpet players in the staff--not above the staff, but in the staff; he played nice fast runs, triple-tongue stuff; he played blues beautifully. No trumpet player could beat Chris Kelly, though, according to AJ; he wishes there were some records of CK's; AJ doesn't believe anybody

could ever play the blues the way CK did; he played "Careless Love" so well as if he had been the composer of them; he would do so many different things with his trumpet, mute it, use the derby or the rim of the derby for a mute, put it against the wall to get different tones; he was weally great; when he played, everybody would get happy, until they'd fight; [they'd get high on the music;] he'd play "Holler Blues" and "High Society", "Pork Chop Rag", and "Ice Cream."

AJ also played with [Papa] Celestin; this was in 1941; Celestin had broken up his band for a while, and he worked in the shipyards; but he formed a new band with Ricard [Alexis], who had been a trumpet player in his [PC's] old Tuxedo Band, and Bill Matthews who used to play drums with him; however, Ricard was now playing bass, and Matthews played trombone; Albert [Fernandez?] Walters played trumpet with Celestin and Kid Clayton was with that group too. They had played together for about six months, when, Celesting was run over and broke his leg and quit playing for a whole year; that broke up the band, of course. Then somebody contacted Ricard because he needed a Dixieland band for the Paddock [Lounge]; and Ricard contacted Celestin, and that's how Celestin started playing Dixieland; before that he had always had an orchestra that played different kinds of music; it was in his last years, when he played Dixieland on Bourbon street that his band became so famous; before that he had always had an orchestra that played different kinds of music; it was in his last years, when he played Dixieland on Bourbon street, that his band became so famous; before that he always had two or three trumpet players in the band.

After playing with Celestin, AJ started playing with Rene Parker, trumpet, and "Big Fire", who played trombone; with that band they went down to the country, to Buras, etc., St. Bernard Parish; the band was called the Oneida [?] Jazz Band; AJ played with that band for about two years; it was a pretty good job. Then he came back and wanted to organize his own band; he had Albert Walters in it, and Frank Crump, ~~Elwood--Elton--Alvin?~~ Theodore; they played together for about three years. Finally he joined Albert Burbank, who was organizing a band. WR recorded them at that time. This was in 1945, at Burbank's house; one group had Wooden Joe [Nicholas] in them, and Big Eye Louis [Nelson]; there also was a recording date with Herb Morand; the one with Wooden Joe was in 1949. They made the last record when Bunk Johnson was very sick, and WR couldn't finish recording; he wanted to see Bunk, who then died the next day. AJ also made a record with Burbank and Elmer Talbert and Lester Lewis, piano, who was a nice Dixieland piano player but has stopped playing since then; these records were made in a home in the Orleans Street project. They made it for souvenir reasons mainly; this was in 1942, during the war, and they didn't have aluminum blanks, so they used glass blanks which break so easily. Burbank may still have some records from this session (AJ has one left), and so might Lester Lewis; Talbert is dead, but his wife may still have them; she used to live on Rampart Street, right by the pressing shop she had there, but the place may have been torn down since then. The last record AJ made was with King [i.e., Ken] Colyer.