

DON EWELL

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December 1, 1960

Also present: William Russell.

The interview was conducted at DE's apartment, 905 Royal Street, New Orleans, Louisiana.

Donald Tyson Ewell was born November 14, 1916, in Baltimore, Maryland. He tootled on slide whistle and toy sax at about age 6, later switching to a piccolo, which he taught himself to play well enough to be in the high school band at 8 or 9 (years old). His father had played bass, although DE didn't hear him. When DE was 10, he began taking piano lessons from a Rachel Phillips, in Laurel, Delaware, where the Ewell family then lived; he studied for about a year or two, combining his formal study with playing popular tunes, such as "Ain't She Sweet" and "That's My Weakness Now." There were several good musicians in Laurel, among them being Maxwell Knowles, pianist, present whereabouts unknown; the musicians were all about the age of DE's brother, a trombonist-violinist, about 5 years older than DE. The brother got a scholarship to Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore, quit after a couple of years, played trombone in a number of bands, and was with the Hack Biagini [sp?] band of Detroit, alleged to have become the Casa Loma Band, led by Glen Gray; the brother did a lot of traveling then, around 1929-30. DE's first exposure to the music of well-known bands was through his brother's records of bands such as Miff Mole's, Red Nichols' and Bix Beiderbecke's. In 1935, DE began studying composition at Peabody Conservatory, on a 1-year

scholarship, and painting (although he didn't get past charcoals) for two years on a 4-year scholarship to Maryland Institute of Fine Arts. He studied piano with a Peabody graduate, not at the school, but in Towson, Maryland, then the home of his family. DE didn't hear the pianist, Eubie Blake, of Baltimore. He listened to pianists who played in the styles of Fats Waller, whom he heard in person a couple of times, and [Earl] Hines, the latter only on records. Most of DE's impressions came from listening to recordings. DE went to Washington, D. C., to hear Jelly Roll Morton at the Jungle Inn, but Morton was elsewhere both times DE went. At that time, DE was engrossed in the styles of Teddy Wilson, Waller, Hines, [Joe] Sullivan and [Jess] Stacy; the "classical" style of jazz piano playing impressed him about 1939-40, largely due to the friendship of Bill Riddle, a Baltimore record collector now in Washington; Riddle kept insisting that DE should hear music other than what he was hearing (instead of Goodman, DE should listen to Ellington, etc., and instead of Waller, Morton).

DE's first experience in playing with a "jazz" group was around Towson, usually with a trio, which would play tunes such as "Jada." There was not much sympathy for jazz in the high school at Towson, so DE did not play in school. He did play [later?] as accompanist, and played a couple of recitals alone. DE prefers Mozart sonatas to Beethoven sonatas; he was very fond of Chopin. DE decided that play-

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ing classical music was not just the thing he wanted, perhaps because it didn't have much beat, although he says that in recent years he has heard recordings of groups playing classics, and they had a pretty good beat, especially European recording groups. In 1936, DE, in a trio consisting of clarinetist Eddie Karko [sp?] and a drummer (all of Baltimore), went to Atlantic City and Wildwood, New Jersey. Upon his return from the unsuccessful trip, his family persuaded him to attend the YMCA business school; among his achievements there was a typing speed of about 80 WPM; he got an office job in Towson, and later went to work in an investment bank. At that time, he joined The Townsmen, the most popular swing band in Baltimore and several states; the band, 10 or 11 piece, featured record-copy arrangements (Goodman, Casa Loma, et al), plus several originals. DE's brother played trombone with the band; his style, a combination of Miff Mole, Jack Teagarden and himself, was favorably commented on by Tommy Dorsey; the brother doesn't play often now, having been with a farm machinery company for years. In 1939, DE formed his own trio in Baltimore, also playing several single engagements. He was in the Army from September 1941, until November 1945; at Fort Knox, Kentucky, although not attached to a band unit, he played with a service dance band, and would also play clandestinely in Louisville, about 25 miles away. Trigger Alpert, bassist, was looking for a pianist for the service

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band he led; DE tried out, impressed Alpert, was transferred to Indianapolis, (Fort Benjamin Harrison) and into a service band; he played flute in the concert band, glockenspiel in the marching band and piano in the dance band. He also wrote a few arrangements. Alpert, called to join the Geln Miller service band, wanted to take DE, but Mel Powell had already been accepted for it. DE, in the Air Force at the time, was at Stout Field in Indianapolis, where he remained a year and a half; from there, he went to Baer Field [sp?], Fort Wayne, Indiana for about a year, then to George Field, across the state line from Vincennes, Indiana. DE, upon his discharge [from Andrews Field, Washington, D. C.], went to New York in the latter part of December, 1945, where he met Bunk [Johnson]; DE went with Bill Riddle. DE says he was actually persuaded to go by Al Hansen (WR says Hansen used to come to Gene Williams' house in New York, where the band stayed, to take lessons from Bunk), a close friend in the Army; Hansen is now teaching composition and harmony part-time, having graduated from Los Angeles Conservatory, and works at Lockheed [Aircraft]; Hansen got the Bunk band to allow DE to sit in, and Bunk was pleased with DE's playing; Bunk asked DE to play in his [next] band, which would be coming to New York in April [1946]. DE played at a concert for the benefit of Yugoslavia [or Yugoslavians], held in Town Hall, New York; the concert was promoted by Jan Kindler, of Baltimore, son

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of Hans Kindler, conductor of the National Symphony Orchestra [Washington], who got Orson Welles to M.C. the show. DE was to play Jelly Roll [Morton] style. Kindler was writing a book on jazz at the time, mostly about Morton. WR says Kindler brought test pressings of Morton's Library of Congress records for Bunk to hear; Bunk went to sleep during the first number. Kindler is now in New York, but DE does not know what he is doing; the father has died. DE played at Town Hall with a trio (Albert Nicholas, clarinet and Baby Dodds, drums); they played "Wolverine Blues" and "Buddy Bolden's Blues." The date was January 1, 1946. [See poster & Program.] Later that evening, DE went to a recording session of Bunk and Ernestine Washington. Several days afterwards, DE made his recording session for Rudi Blesh, with the same trio. The Town Hall concert was called "A Night in New Orleans," and was for Yugoslav relief; Louis Armstrong, scheduled to appear, could not, so he sent a transcription of his good wishes; Clarence Williams, washboard, and Red Allen [trumpet] were among the performers. DE had not made commercial recordings before the Blesh date (he made some transcriptions in the Army, and home recordings); the first strain of "Manhattan Rag" (on the session) had been going through his mind for several days before he knew he was to record, so when he was notified of the recording date, he added a strain and used it on the session. After the session, DE went back to Baltimore;

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while talking to an acquaintance who was going to New Orleans, he decided to go there. He got a job as solo pianist at Marty Burke's across from the Old Absinthe House, on Bourbon Street, where he played several weeks; from there he went to the Trade Winds, on Iberville. He worked at several New Orleans places. He joined a band that played at the Dog House; others in the group were [J. Horner], "Pinky" Wadlington, bass; Jimmy Crawford, tenor sax and Carl Shearer [sp?], drums. DE was in New Orleans the Mardi Gras of 1946; in April; he went back to New York to join Bunk's band.

End of Reel I

Also present: William Russell.

DE joined Bunk Johnson's band in New York in April, 1946; the band played for 9 weeks (8 initially and held over one week), [ending ?] the first week in June (when the [trio] records were made.) DE decided that "Comp," or "Chording" style of piano would be best for the band, as [Lawrence] Marrero, the banjoist, who had not made the trip because of an economy move on the part of the owners of the Suyvesant Casino (they wanted only six pieces), played that style on his banjo. [The owners of the Styvesant now managed the hall.] DE says after he decided that, he was less nervous. He says Bunk was a great lead, the best he has ever heard; Bunk "knew not only what notes to play, but what notes to eliminate." DE doesn't remember that the band had any rehearsals before the engagement; WR says the band rehearsed once, the night before they opened in September, but they had no more because some of the members objected to having them. DE says there was one rehearsal later, during the [1946] engagement, but it didn't work out very well; they worked on "The Wise Old Owl" and other current pops. Bunk was a wonderful reader. WR says he bought music for Bunk, including "Bell-bottom Trousers," "No Can Do," and others. Bunk liked to play "Maria Elena;" DE says that because Bunk liked to play currently popular tunes, as well as the jazz "standards," he changed his ideas about jazz repertoire. WR says the old

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New Orleans bands played the current pops, and that they were [after all] dance bands, and had to keep up with what was popular. DE points out that "standards" were the popular tunes of their day. Although Alton Purnell usually played a piano introduction (almost always the same) during the 1945 engagement (WR says), the 1946 band usually just started right out on the tune; if they used an introduction, it would usually ^{be} the full band playing the last 4 or last 8 measures of the tune. The band's routine (order of solos, etc.) was set. DE says he himself would have preferred more ensemble work in the band, rather than so many solos. Usually Bunk played only one last ensemble chorus. WR says Bunk would play all the way through a tune if he felt right, playing soft backgrounds for the other men, etc., but pushing the rhythm. There is talk of Bunk's "lazy" attack--playing behind the beat; DE says Bunk would play that way, and also anticipate the beat in other instances, when the rhythm was right; if the rhythm was not right, he would play right on the beat; regardless of the way he played, he always came out right at the end. DE listened to Bunk in the band, not consciously critical of what he was doing, but appreciating Bunk's music as an entity; DE would, of necessity, be more conscious of the harmonic structure of the particular song, as he had to play the right chords in the right places. DE says Bunk would stomp once in the last 4 or 8 bars of a piece to indicate that the piece was to

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end that chorus. Bunk never just began playing a piece without telling the other band members what it was to be; some leaders have done and still do this; DE says that practice of just starting is OK in some situations, but not in others. WR says that during the first engagement, the Bunk band would immediately repeat a number if the applause warranted it; DE says the band of the second engagement did that a couple of times. (The first engagement was from September 25, 1945 until January 12, 1946; WR says the band played almost everything twice, unless the tune didn't seem to go over very well.) DE says the band played a lot of pieces he had heard but had not bothered to learn; "You Always Hurt the One You Love" was one; WR says that tune was practically a theme on the first engagement, that the band opened almost every night with that. Others in the Bunk band with DE were Slow Drag [Pavageau, bass]; George Lewis [clarinet]; Jim Robinson [trombone]; Kaiser Marshall, drums, replaced by Alphonse Steele, who was on the [trio] records with Bunk and DE [for American Music]. DE wishes the band had had Cie [Frazier] on drums; he heard him at a Rudi Blesh program for the National Jazz Foundation at the St. Charles Hotel, where Bunk's band played and DE played a couple of interim solos; DE was told that Bunk didn't use Cie on the New York job because Cie was a street drummer [!!!]

DE says it is a shame that [critics in] so many magazines didn't

have the appreciation of Bunk that he had; WR says he is to blame, in part, because of the quality of the recordings of Bunk that he issued.

DE played at a concert [with Bunk] at Orchestra Hall [Chicago] on September 6 [1946]. DE stayed in Chicago a couple of months, went back to Baltimore until some time in December that year; he got a wire from Pinkey [Wadlington] or Buzz Wilson (a good trumpet player with whom he had worked in New Orleans) asking him to play again; he accepted, and the band worked in Houma [Louisiana]. In the Spring of 1947, DE played in Minneapolis with Bunk; they were supposed to have an extensive tour of the Mid-West, arranged by John Schenck, but it didn't work out. DE went back to Chicago, playing occasional jobs at the Moose Hall, and at the Twin Terrace (since then, the Blue Note, defunct since 1960). DE enjoyed sitting in with Lee Collins; although Collins' playing was sometimes erratic, his tone and feeling almost always offset any other shortcomings; Collins said Bunk "had everybody stopped down here [New Orleans]." DE says he doesn't know why he himself got a reputation as being a rag player, because he didn't go into rags very much. DE opened Jazz, Ltd. in Chicago, with Doc Evans [cornet & leader], Danny Alvin, drums, Munn Ware, trombone, and Bill Reinhart [clarinet and owner]; Sidney Bechet joined the band later [replacing ~~RE~~ Evans. RBA], DE liked him very ~~well~~ much.

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DE wished Bechet had played clarinet instead of soprano sax; WR says Bechet told him the sax mouthpiece was easier on his teeth, which were not so good in late years. SB played many of his own tunes. DE worked about 8 months with Bechet; then Muggsy Spanier came [into the band?] for a couple of months. DE was not present the night Sidney's brother, Dr. [Leonard] Bechet sat in with the band. DE played with Natty Dominique, who sat in some Sunday afternoon sessions at the Bee Hive, where DE was working with Miff Mole [tb], Darnell Howard [cl], and Booker T. Washington [d]. DE was supposed to record with Dominique then, and later, but neither session worked out, for various reasons.

DE played with Kid Ory's band in San Francisco, for over a year. Al Hansen got DE into the Ory band. Mutt [Carey] was out of Ory's band then; DE never played with Mutt. DE joined Ory in August or September of 1953; they had 4 weeks at the Hangover Club, after which they went to Los Angeles to play at the Beverly Caverns, but that job fell through; so they went back to the Hangover on a full year's contract. DE liked San Francisco, so he now calls it his home [he ~~has~~ ^{later} ~~since~~ changed allegiance, and now lives in Florida]. As a leader, Ory dominated the scene. The band rehearsed only for recording dates, except for a rehearsal before the band began the year's contract at the Hangover. All the arrangements were by head. DE enjoyed playing in the section with Ed Garland and Ram Hall.

End of Reel II

