

FRANK AMACKER  
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July 1, 1960

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Also present: Richard B. Allen, Paul R. Crawford.

Frank Amacker, of 2520 2nd Street, New Orleans, begins by saying that he began playing music at the 101 Ranch, with Jimmy Palao.

FA was born in New Orleans, on Calliope between Dryades and Baronne, March 22, 1890. He began playing music when he was 16, playing in the District, first with [in the company of ?] [Oscar] "Papa" Celestin, then with [A. J.] Piron and then with Manuel Perez. His first instrument was piano; he later took up guitar. He studied piano (about 15, 16 years old) with Professor [Henry] Nickerson, at Southern University, Soniat and Magazine [streets], who had him play popular, classic, semi-classic music, such things as [the overtures from] "Poet and Peasant," "William Tell," "Cavalleria Rusticana," [sp ?]; "Flower Song", and "Hearts and Flowers." He studied scales, and from methods. FA says the professor told him never to practice a piece of music, but to concentrate on scales, as that is what music was, that if he knew scales he could take any piece of music and read it just like a newspaper. He used a method [published] by Schirmer. He played piano with bands before he took lessons; he says he is what one might call a prodigy. He says people are still amazed that he can play a melody and accompany himself on guitar simultaneously. He has never used a pick, playing guitar only with his fingers. [He had very long fingernails at the time of this interview.] He thought

of the tune, "Kiss Me Again" the day of the interview, and asked himself how that tune came to him. RBA asks him to play it, which he does [several times in the course of the afternoon]. FA says that his good guitar is in pawn, and he hopes the interviewers can help him get it out. RESTRICT (obsenity here) FA says his studies with Professor Nickerson, when FA was 15, were school exercises, but that he never studied music seriously until he was 30 years old. FA then plays a flamenco-type melody, "After Hours in Old Mexico."

FA says he played solo piano before playing with bands; he played in the District at such places as Gypsy Schaeffer's [sp ?], Tom Anderson's and the 101 Ranch. RBA mentions that he was and is known as Dude Robertson. One of the other pianists around then was Tony Jackson, "one of the greatest single-handed entertainers that the world's ever known." Some of his feature numbers were "Pretty Baby" (his own composition), "How Do You Do, How Do You Do, Said the Lovebird," "Black and White Rag" and "Maple Leaf Rag." RBA asks if FA ever played [Tony Jackson's] "The Naked Dance;" FA says he played many naked dances, but the piano player was just supposed to play, keeping his eyes on the keyboard and not looking at the whores. FA then says that it is God's will that he looks as young as he is today, that it must be that he is being saved for something special by God. Continuing, he says Tony Jackson had a beautiful tenor voice. FA says

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Jackson, who died in Chicago, played in Chicago at such places as the Pekin Theater and the Vendome Theater. FA answers RBA, saying he was in Chicago, too, and that he played with Manuel Perez' band there. FA was there in 1920, [check date RBA] at the Royal Garden, after Frank Ahaynia was with Perez. FA was just visiting Chicago, and filled in for a girl named Lottie [possibly Taylor ?], who was the regular pianist. Others in the band were Perez, cornet; [William] BeBe Ridgley, trombone; Joe [possibly <sup>B. J.</sup> Jimmy RBA] Johnson, bass; Willie Santiago, guitar; George Baquet, clarinet; Ernest Trepagnier, drums. FA says other good drummers were Louis Cottrell [Sr.] and Henry Zeno. FA answers that he knew Alfred Wilson, a tall, handsome pianist who beat Tony Jackson, at Lincoln Park, playing "Maple Leaf Rag." FA says Wilson, then working at Willie Piazza's house, died in Carrollton [section], on Broadway [a street in New Orleans]. FA did not know Alfred Cahill. He knew "Birmingham" an ear [piano] player, (who was so-named because he was from that Alabama city); "Birmingham" used to sit around the bars, and could play what is now known as boogie-woogie. FA says all the pianists who used to hang around whorehouses could play boogie-woogie, that they did it for the fun of it. FA answers that he knew "Black Pete," and says Pete was called Black because he was very dark; Pete was an "f# piano player," meaning that he played in keys utilizing the black piano keys.

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Black Pete loved dogs, and always had dogs. Pete was from New Orleans. . . . FA says W. C. Handy was very famous then. He says Clarence Williams started out in New Orleans, who became well-known after he left. FA says Williams used to follow him all over the country trying to learn how to play the piano. FA says he himself can still really play the piano. He says a piece he features better than anybody in the world is "[That] Teasin' Rag." [check title] He (obsenities here) also plays "Rose Leaf Rag," and "Frog Legs Rag." FA says he still has a left-hand movement that nobody else ever caught on to, that it is really something, and it looks like he is going to carry it to his grave. FA answers that he knew Ferdinand "Jelly Roll" Morton, also known as "Winin' Boy," and says he was one of the world's greatest stomp piano players. FA says he was in Los Angeles when Morton died. FA says he himself was a pretty wealthy fellow in California, for 32 years, but he lost it all. He shows bank deposit books to bear him out. FA says Morton had his own style, and that no matter how fast he played, he was just like a metronome. FA says that he is the only person in town who can play Morton's "[Original] Jelly Roll Blues," <sup>and</sup> that he can play it in its entirety. FA answers that he does not know why Morton was called "Winin' Boy," but perhaps it was because Morton would wind around the country so

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much, even going to Europe, [Compare Lomax, Mr. Jelly Roll.] FA does not know "Windin' and Grindin'," which Louis [Armstrong] is said to have played in his early days, according to RBA. FA says he himself was famous during the time Sidney Bechet was a kid learning how to play; FA says people should keep talking about Bechet, because he left a wonderful history behind him. FA played with Bechet in Jimmy Palao's band at Pete Lala's; others in the band were old man Volteau, [check sp] Joe Oliver and Buddy Christian. [Was FA subbing for B. C.? RBA] FA is amazed that RBA has heard of so many of the old players. RBA mentions D'Abadie's and the Big 25, John Lala's place. FA says the Big 25 was at Iberville and Franklin [now Crozat], while that of his brother, Pete [no relation, and not named Lala, according to Michael N. Lala, Jr.], was at Iberville and Marais. RBA mentions that Buddy Christian, a pianist at the time of the Palao band at Pete Lala's, changed to guitar and banjo, and FA agrees. RBA says Danny Barker told him Christian died about a year ago. RBA says Clarence Williams is also sick, or has been.

FA says it is strange that the greatest pianist of them all, Art Tatum, is never mentioned by anyone [not so--mentioned very much in the various jazz magazines. PRC], and that he does not know how

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a lot of people get themselves talked about. He says he knows he could play most of the things he hears on television, that all he needs is a chance.

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Also present: Richard B. Allen, Paul R. Crawford.

RBA again asks FA about the personnel of the band at Pete Lala's, led by Jimmy Palao. FA says that besides himself, there were [at various times] Joe Oliver, old man Volteau, Willie Humphrey the elder and "Big Eye (obscurity here) Louis ["Nelson" Delisle]. FA is amazed the RBA knows and/or knows of so many of the old-timers. They talk of Humphrey, who at the time was sick, at his uptown home [died, early 1964], and RBA says he used to hear Big Eye Louis at Luthjen's, with Ernest Rogers in the band. The first band FA played in was led by Palao, with [Oscar "Papa"] Celestin in the band, at the 101 Ranch, owned by Billy Phillips, who was shot and killed by Gyp the Blood, at 4:20 [AM] on Easter Monday. FA says the band he was with, Jimmy Palao's, had just been paid at 4 o'clock, and that if the killing had occurred before, they would not have been paid. Gyp the Blood, after killing Phillips, went across the street and killed the owner of the place there, Charlie Parker. FA says that violence "closed down the District," that it was the cause of its being closed [at that time]. RBA says he has read newspapers of that happening, that it was in 1913. Also in Palao's band at that time were Lorenzo Tio, clarinet; Freddy Keppard, trumpet; [William] "BeBe" Ridgley, trombone; Billy Marrero, bass; FA, piano and Palao, violin and leader. RBA says Manuel Manetta has told him about the killings. FA says Manetta is a

long-time personal friend of his, and a very good musician. . . .

RBA asks about a man named Bentley, of Alexandria, Louisiana. FA says that he played at the Bentley Hotel there in 1918. Then he tells about a man named Salvador [sp ?], an Italian, who had six New Orleans musicians, including FA, come to Alexandria to play at a taxi dance hall. FA says the hours, 8 to 10:45, were that way because the last street car back into town left the place then. The job didn't pay Salvador, so he asked the band to stay with him, [and he acted as agent, presumably] that he would see that they were paid. After a while, [8 or 10 weeks?] they were not paid one week, so they went home. Besides FA on piano, there were O'Neil Lavoisier [sp ?], violin; Wesley Dimes (later killed by a policeman in Baton Rouge), trumpet; Ambrose [Powers], trombone. FA does not remember the clarinetist or the drummer. He knew clarinetist Louis Prevost and drummer Joe Rena, but says he never worked with them. [Rena told RBA about this band in which he was the drummer.] <sup>P</sup> Then he names clarinetists he worked with: Sidney Bechet, George Baquet, "Big Eye" Louis Nelson and Sam Dutrey [Sr.]. He says he worked with Big Eye Louis in Jimmy Palao's band at the 101 Ranch. Then he says the method of replacing bands was different then than now; then a band might go to its regular job and find another entire band on the stand, so the old band would just go back home. They received no notice. (FA also



mentions something about "new men in the band? [?].)

FA answers that he still knows "Baby, I'd Love to Steal ~~FA~~<sup>you</sup>," which was featured by Tony Jackson. FA says he himself now features a tune, a march, on which he plays the march and imitates the drummer at the same time. He plays "Gettysburg," including a minor strain, which RBA says only FA know~~s~~.

RBA asks who played the lead [or melody] in bands when FA first began playing; FA says the violin or the cornet always played lead. (He is probably referring to solos when he says in those days, no matter how good the piano player was, he was not allowed to play anything but chords, never to embellish or elaborate.)

FA didn't play guitar with bands; he only played piano with bands.

FA then plays a composition of his, "E Rag," on the guitar. He says all instruments are toys compared to the guitar (as he plays it); he says a person can study piano for 10 years and know more about his instrument than a guitarist can in 40 years. He picks with all five fingers. He then plays excerpts from "Dark Eyes" and "Waves of the Danube" also known as "The Anniversary Song." He says he was playing those songs--he follows with "Trees"--, not singing and accompanying himself, as [most of] the other guitar players would do.

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FA was taught guitar (in Los Angeles) by H. Douglas Greer, "a Boston Conservatory man." FA says Greer did not play with bands, that he was an outstanding teacher, of Paderewski and people like that.

FA says he goes to Werlein's [music store] sometimes, and that the salesmen tell him they can't play the way [in the manner] he does. He says playing his finger style is very hard.

FA plays ["Lover, Come Back to Me", from] "New Moon."

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Also present: Richard B. Allen, Paul R. Crawford.

FA plays "Kiss Me Again," and then his "E Rag" [sounds as though he may have said "C," but tune is same as previous, and pitch is E or E<sup>b</sup>, depending on recorder and/or guitar].

FA answers that some of the good old-time blues piano players in his day were Sam Henry, "Kitchen," Ollie Sullivan and "Birmingham." He says they featured a lot of various blues, although they could play other types of songs, etc., like "Oh, You Beautiful Doll" and "Rufus Rastus Johnson Brown." They also made up blues and rags, one of the most famous being Jelly Roll Morton's "[Original] Jelly Roll Blues," which was played by pianists of that day, but is not played much today. . . . A man who was called "Lulu" was another of the good piano players. Sam Henry played in the Gravier Street district. . . . FA says other pianists around Gasquet Street [uptown district] good in their time were Buddy Goins [sp ?], Josky Adams (still alive) and Son Swan. He did not know "Big Eye" Louis Robertson, pianist. FA says he knew "Big" Cato, who still lives uptown, around the Irish Channel.

FA says that nowadays the bands sound bad because everyone is playing the same thing, that each instrument<sup>ist</sup> should be playing his parts to make it sound good. Answering RBA's question, he says clarinetists in that time would play a lot of "side" melodies, and

play variations behind the melody. FA says George Baquet and Lorenzo Tio were masters of the style, and that Louis [check sp] "Papa" Tio was a master musician. He says [A. J.] Piron was a good violinist, and Peter Bocage, with whom he played at times, was another good violinist. FA says he himself had a band that played at George "Fewclothes" [Foucault] dance hall, across the street from the Big 25. He mentions Jimmie "Jimbo" Noone, saying that he played with him at times. Personnels changed rapidly then. He played with Thomas Benton, guitarist, who died in 1947. He says Benton's sister, whom he had not seen for 50 years until the day before this interview, lives at 3924 Magnolia Street. TB played the style FA plays now.

FA left New Orleans the latter part of 1919, for Chicago, where he stayed until December 28, 1920; he then went to Los Angeles, arriving there January 1, 1921. With Los Angeles as his base, he came back to New Orleans, for 3 weeks, in 1925, 3 weeks in 1948, and then moved back permanently in 1953, to New Orleans. RBA and FA look at a bank book of FA, which shows that he was in California as late as March 16, 1953. (His wife's name was Cecile.) Answering RBA's question, FA says that the music was all jazz in Chicago when he was there. Erskine Tate had the band at the Vendome Theater. RBA says he has a record of the band, with Teddy Weatherford on piano and

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Louis Armstrong on cornet [i.e., trumpet]. FA says good piano players there then were Tony Jackson, Dave Peyton, Charles L. "Doc" Cooke ("a crackerjack"), and Clarence Jones, who played as a single at the Owls Theater. He answers RBA's question by saying that he knew [Richard M.] "Myknee" Jones, who was a good piano player, but did not "rate" with the others he mentioned. FA says a lot of the pianists in Chicago "had more stuff" than the ones in New Orleans. FA mentions Fate Marable, and says Manuel [Manetta] told him he got Fate's job playing the calliope [on the Streckfus boat], and that he, FA, finds it hard to believe that Manetta could follow Fate. RBA mentions Amos White and Sidney Desvignes, and FA says Desvignes died not long ago. FA says a pianist in Los Angeles, Harvey Brooks, was very good; RBA says he still plays, and was on the Joe Darensbourg hit record, "Yellow Dog Blues." FA says another fellow very popular [pianists?] in the [L. A.] music world was Elzie (L. Z.) [sp?] Cooper, Walter Johnson, Harold Brown. FA says Harvey Brooks wrote "A Little Bird Told Me," and he heard that Brooks got \$62,000 for it.

FA says a really good singer, like Perry Como, should be able to take the song he now plays, which he composed, and make a hit of it. FA then says Piron heard him playing a song, years ago, and told him it was the most beautiful song he had ever heard, that he would write it down and make him famous. The name of the song is "All The Boys Got To Love Me, That's All."

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FA says he composed the tune ["All The Boys Got To Love Me, That's All"], Johnny St. Cyr wrote the words and [A. J.] Piron "wrote it down on paper," between 40 and 50 years ago. It was never printed as sheet music. FA asked Piron, in 1925, what had happened to the song. Piron told him that what they had thought was good, in that time, was not good. FA tells again of how he was playing it, in the District, and that Piron praised the song, telling him he would put him in the limelight, and that he would never again write a song that good. All the people in the District praised the song. Piron wrote it down on paper, and St. Cyr wrote words for it; FA says St. Cyr could write better words than anyone, and faster. *P* FA says he composed a blues, "the most unusual blues you ever heard;" he sang it in a place in Los Angeles, where three women were so affected that they cried. He plays and sings the blues, which is about the way a swain handles his girl's flirting at a party; instead of taking issue at the party, he waits until he gets her home, where he tells her he is sorry he met her, among other things, and finishes his lecture by saying he is going to take her into the woods and shoot her, after which he will caution the people who bury her to lower her gently, because she is his darling.

In response to RBA's question, FA says he knew Johnny and [Benjamin] Reb Spikes, in California; he says the Spikes brothers were good musicians.

He then plays his blues again.

Answering RBA's question, FA says he used to play rags, such as "Maple Leaf Rag" on the guitar.

FA does not remember Harry Southern, trombonist, who had a band in California; RBA says Willie Humphrey [the elder] used to play with him. FA continues his attempt to hustle RBA into doing something with his blues. *[unclue off]*

Answering RBA's question, FA says the greatest "by head" violinist that he ever heard of was Herbert Lindsay, called "Fiddle Up." RBA says he was the brother of Johnny Lindsay, and that Herbert played with Louis Keppard, Roy Palmer and [Lawrence] Duhe. FA says that Herbert could make more double stops than any other violinist, including Piron, Bocage and Manetta, that he could make double stops on every note even if a piece was "as long as from here to Canal Street." *A wizard*  
He could play four-part harmony on every note, regardless of the tempo.

FA answers the question about good trumpet players by saying that Buddy Bolden was the loudest. Freddy Keppard was a master, and so was Manuel Perez, but the most masterful master of all was

James McNeil [check sp.], who was college-trained. George Moret, Andrew Kimball and Alcibiade Jeanjacques were fine "street" men, all readers. In contrast, Bolden played "this old lowdown music."

FA says he remembers "Funky Butt" [also known as "Buddy Bolden's Blues"], and that blues pianists were very popular in his time. He says that a lot of the tunes which dancers enjoyed were funny, and had funny titles. FA says Bolden played one called "The House Got Ready," which was a "tough," fast number that the dancers liked. <sup>[Machine 011]</sup> FA plays and scats a tune he says is called "You Go To Hell," and says Sam Henry [piano] used to play pieces like that.

FA says that the "professors" in brothels could get by only knowing about three tunes. He says that a professor would go to work at the appointed hour, follow instructions by playing a rag and two or three other tunes, after which he left, unless there were customers. When customers did arrive, he would be summoned to play. He would play three or four tunes; then one of the girls, or the madam, would pass his hat, telling the customers to put something in for the professor. FA says the hat was always passed after every three or four numbers, no matter how much a customer put in any single time. FA says customers were always shown out as soon as they were broke.



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FA does not remember trombonist August Roussell. He says Johnny Delpit [sp?] was a good violinist. He says Frank DeLandry [or D. Landry or DeLandro?] was the greatest guitarist he ever heard. He says all the guitars were buried [figuratively, in honor of him] when DeLandry died.

End of Reel IV

