

unedited first draft

GUS FONTENET
REEL I [only]
Undated

INTERVIEWER: George Brown
ALSO PRESENT: Others
NOTES: Richard B. Allen
SUMMARY: Dan Weisman
TYPING: Dan Weisman

[This interview took place at New Iberia, La. See letters from George Brown for more information on interview.]

I started playing music when I was 17 years old. I played with the Banner Band under Adam Broussard, [who with] Herbert Napoleon, and I, were the founders of this band--the Banner Band.

Then, we got Tom Edwards, Robert Stafford, Peter Broussard - that was the brother of Adam - [to join the band].

We met at Philip Chaisson's home [who was also in the band]. At that time, for a few years, [we played here in New Iberia]. We weren't playing. We were only trying to learn music. [We practiced] for a few years before we started playing.

After we started playing, we started traveling. We [went] from here to Houma, Thibodaux, Donaldsonville; as far as Columbus, Texas, Galveston, Houston. We used to be there regular--Port Arthur, Beaumont.

We used to travel in those days in a bus. Before we started making those long trips, we used to travel in a wagon. Then we got promoted to a []. It took about three hours, or more, [to travel in a wagon]...

When I first started playing, [we were paid] \$1.25 apiece. That was around here. We'd get more [elsewhere]. [We got] \$2.50 after the war, World War I.

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[There were] seven men [in this combo.] [Later,] we had 10 in the Banner Band. Ten is easier than when he had seven. We had, I think, three saxes, two trumpets, and a trombone. We had three saxes...One of the saxes, he would play a little on the bass drum, guitar also, and clarinet.

Lawrence Duhe' was saxophone, and clarinet. Ed [Reedom? played] banjo, guitar, violin, and bass. Duhe' played on B-Flat clarinet. We had [a] string bass. [We had four rhythm, three brass, and three saxes.]...

[We would drive to Lafayette in a wagon.] After we stopped traveling to Lafayette in a wagon, we used to rent automobiles to carry us. They charged so much we thought of buying an automobile of our own.

Mr. Harry Hall and Mr. Emile Villere, they were automobile dealers. We spoke to them about financing us to buy it second-handed. They had a Dodge truck. They would sell it to us if we could put up a certain amount of money.

We were doing so well at that time, they lent it to us for four days with the understanding that we would pay someone else for an automobile, and we would put that on a down-payment.

Our first down-payment was \$136 to them. After that, every week we would give \$25, every Sunday.

We were playing in Youngville...The first month we had this car, we paid them \$482. The total cost was \$1300. [That was] new.

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The second month, we paid \$372.

They were very nice with us. They didn't charge any interest. Mr. Hall knew me, and Robert Stafford, very well. That's the way we got [the car].

He said, afterwards, that it gave us such good service, it helped them to sell the other cars. They made money by letting us have it.

They had the Black Eagle Band of Crowley. They had the Yelpin' Hounds of Crowley [in the area].

Vidal's Band was all brass, but they didn't play jazz. They had [Joe] Gabriel from Thibodaux. They had Claiborne Williams from Donaldsonville. Stewart from Baton Rouge.

Toots Johnson from Baton Rouge...I don't know what Toots Johnson played. He played violin, I think. They had the Royal Band of Lake Charles.

Most of the bands at that time had seven, or eight, [players]. We felt we were better than all [of the other bands]. In many instances, it was true. [Bunk Johnson was in the band,] and it was very hard to beat.

Lawrence Duhe' was just the same as Bunk...but he didn't get the fame that Bunk did. [Neither did] Evan Thomas.

Charinton Beach was one of the places we played Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Sunday, every other Sunday. We played in Youngsville every other Sunday.

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We played Abbeville, Erath, Guydin, Kaplan, Eunice, Opelousas, Jeanrette, Morgan City, Franklin, Houma, Thibodaux, Donaldsonville, Lake Charles, Crowley, Ville Platte.

It was regular dances. In Charinton, they had what they called jitney dances. You would play a number, and then everybody would leave off the pavilion. As soon as they left the pavilion, you would start up.

They would charge them 10 cents a dance. They would charge the gentleman 10 cents. Lafayette hosted the fair and they would have that there. One time, Franklin, they had it. But, [we played] mostly at dances, regular dances.

At that time, they didn't have these night clubs there. We were playing every night. But, today, because of these night clubs, everybody's dancing on Saturdays.

The dances lasted four hours. We were playing every night. After they started these night clubs, the dances started falling off.

Most [attending the dances were well-behaved.] One or two places had floorwalkers. Most of the places, people just came, and enjoyed themselves, and danced.

I feel that there is something [religious that influences the music.] During that time - playing jazz, especially - if you were improvising, the kind of feeling that you would have [was an emotional feeling.]

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During that time, [we played numbers like] "Black Ball," "Smiles," popular tunes. [We played] "High Society" [It] was a very popular New Orleans tune.

We never played in New Orleans. We had cause on two occasions [to play in New Orleans], but we couldn't take the jobs. I used to visit New Orleans frequently.

In our band, Ed Reedom...was a carpenter. Adam Broussard, and I were barbers.

We used to have very little time...and had to have someone replaced nearly all the time. Sometimes, we would leave, and be away for four, or five, days.

Bunk was about the biggest bachelor. He married later on, but everyone else [in the band] were married.

Going to New Orleans to visit, I met my wife. I met my wife-to-be.

That's where I became interested in music. One night, we went out to dancing. I don't remember just what band was playing. It come to me that I want to learn how to play. I guess I was about 16 years old.

I was 21 years old [when I got married]. My wife wasn't interested in the music, but she liked to sing. That had a good deal to do with helping me to improvise...

I tried to improvise. We'd sit on the garret, and I would sing the melody of the number. She'd make the other part. We'd

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continue that until I'd memorize it, and I'd get her to play it.

[Someone, apparently GF's daughter, mentions that his wife started the first singing quartet in the neighborhood. The whole maternal family was musical. Leonard plays guitar; Wilbert, saxophone, and clarinet.] Frankie was a trombone player. George played piccolo.

It was something to listen to. They would get together singing. There were five sisters. [One brother played piccolo].

When I first started...[my mother was a singer]. I did most of our practicing in the barber shop. We worked together in the barber shop. Every chance I would get, I would sit down, and go to practicing. We finally got all this learned.

My Aunt Beulah...bought the first instrument that I played. She had a wonderful voice. [My wife] sang at one time also.

[GF's daughter says he can sing, and was the main vocalist for quite a number of years. The golden voice, and silver tenor, on "Shine."]

We used to have quite a few contests--band contests, two bands...

I play with Carleton Wilson [today]. [The group ranges between seven and nine. The people that you're working for tell you the number that they want.]

There are some people here in New Iberia. They hire a band. They want Dixieland. You play anything else, they ask you to

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stop.

We try to satisfy the people. Try to give them some present day stuff. We try. [We use] a few [ideas from the past].

[A daughter says they really get into it around the holidays, like Christmas and New Years, playing songs like "When the Saints Go Marching In," and "Tiger Rag."]

[Mostly, the younger people like Boogie Woogie, but rock and roll has kind of smothered Boogie Woogie, a daughter says. She thinks rock and roll is somewhat on the same plane as be-bop. It lasts for a while, and then dies out. She doesn't think rock and roll will last either. It might, but she doubts it.]

I notice that rock and roll...some of the numbers on the juke box now are kind of getting away from rock and roll, some of them. Some people seem to think that rock and roll will last, but I don't. It's kind of hard to say.

I think that a [Dixieland] musician has to learn to execute his instrument more than with this rock and roll. [With] Dixieland, when they were playing, everybody was working. Who was better than they are [i.e., competition].

[White musicians didn't sit in when we were playing]. They would come to the dances in different places. [They would follow us around from one place to another.] Manuel Manetta of New Orleans taught quite a few [white musicians.]

[A few notes on trombone are played.]

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END OF REEL