

JOE HARRIS
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April 12, 1961

Also present: William Russell,
Ralph Collins, Harold Dejan

[Interview recorded at home of Joe Harris, 3905 Tchoupitoulas,
New Orleans, Louisiana]

Joseph Dennis Harris was born April 21, 1909, in Lutcher, Louisiana, which is in St. James Parish. WR mentions that Kid Thomas [Valentine] is from Reserve, Louisiana, which is near Lutcher. JH's father, who played clarinet and alto saxophone, worked with all the name bands in New Orleans; JH doesn't remember the name of the group with which his father worked regularly, but there is a picture of the band on the wall in the interview room. JH has a picture of the Dave Bartholomew band (Bartholomew was not present, but was sick at the time), taken when they, including JH, opened the Pelican nightclub on Rampart Street. JH thinks his father (now dead) learned to play in Lutcher, where he studied with Professor Holmes (also dead), who taught all the musicians in that area. [Compare John Joseph, reel ?]

The picture on the wall, showing JH's father, is of the band led by Emile Riley, trumpet player [They have confused ER, a guitarist, and Amos Riley. RBA]; a girl is playing piano; HD identifies the tuba player as August Lanoix (brother-in-law of [Manny?] Gabriel; JH says Lanoix plays with [Herbert] Leary now); the drummer is Willie McGee, although JH is not certain of the first name. The banjoist's name is not recalled. JH played with a lot of the old-timers his father played with; JH was with Papa Celestin for four years. JH says the [Riley] band was next [in popularity?] to Celestin's band in its time. JH doesn't know when the picture was made, but he was quite small at the time. WR mentions that the band had three saxophones, tuba, piano, drums, banjo, trumpet

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and trombone. HD says most every good band carried two or three saxophones; WR says the picture was probably made no earlier than 1920, as saxophones were not in [general] use until about that time; JH agrees.

The first big band JH worked with was that of Henry Harding. His first [regular, or steady?] job with any band was with Kid Clayton; he went with Kid Rena (band included HD), at the Gypsy Tea Room; he then went into the Famous Door, with Smiling Joe; when he left the Famous Door, he took his own band into the Palace Theater; next he played at the Budweiser, a taxi dance hall; his next job was at the Dew Drop [Inn], where he had his own band of eight pieces. He remained at the Dew Drop about two years; he left to join Celestin's Tuxedo Band, remaining with him four years, touring Florida; he returned to New Orleans, he joined Dave Bartholomew. JH was with Celestin around 1944 and [or?] 1945; JH had just left Celestin when Celestin had his accident. Others in Celestin's band with JH: Andy Anderson, Celestin, and Dave Bartholomew, trumpets; Bill Matthews, trombone (when the band went up the state [Louisiana], Big Chief Russell Moore was added on trombone); JH, Willie James (the younger), and Clarence Hall, saxophones; Little Cato (cousin of Big Cato), piano; Leonard Mitchell, guitar; John Porter, bass; Joe Lawrence, singer and saw-player [Compare Lawrence Trotter notes from RBA] [no drums mentioned]. JH says Big Chief Moore, the trombonist, came from an Indian reservation in Oklahoma [check state], where his parents

still lived when Moore was with the Celestin band; Moore left the band in Tallahassee, Florida, to return to his parents and help settle the sale of some of their property. Moore joined the band in Monroe, Louisiana; he was playing with a small band from that town at the time; the Celestin band was playing for the opening of a nightclub there, and Celestin offered Moore a job, which he accepted. Anderson was making high notes at that time. (JH mentions that Bill Matthews, the other trombonist, was [years later] at the Paddock [Lounge, on Bourbon Street], with Octave Crosby.) JH says that after he himself left Celestin, he went with Octave Crosby, at the Tuxedo Club; from there, he went to the Budweiser; then he went with Smiling Joe, at Hyp Guinle's Famous Door, on Bourbon Street. [Compare above, p. 1] WR mentions seeing Moore at the Famous Door, speaking to musicians he knew, including Santo Pecora; JH said Moore was with Louis Armstrong at the time, and that Moore found him, JH, at the Dew Drop. JH says Moore, besides being a fine trombonist, could play piano. WR says Moore was with Sidney Bechet, in Chicago, about ten years ago. JH went to school with a nephew of Bechet's; they started in music together; the nephew, from [Girttown, a section of uptown New Orleans], plays banjo and guitar; one of the [nephew's?] brothers is now a mail carrier. JH got interested in music while in school, being around people like the Bechet nephew; when JH's father would go to work, JH would steal his clarinet and try to play it; JH says he never could play clarinet, however.

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JH played in various other bands, not regularly, but to fill in gaps in his engagements; he played in Houma [Louisiana] for a couple of weeks; George McCullum (now dead), step-brother of Alvin Alcorn, [Compare Alvin Alcorn, reel ?] played trumpet on that engagement; Willie O'Connell, a wonderful guitar and banjo player, was also in the band (O'Connell now lives in Biloxi, is the union representative there); Theodore, who played "all that piano", was in the band.

HD says the banjo player in the picture [mentioned at the beginning of the reel] is Eddie Dorsey ([actually, Dawson] who works at the Whitney Bank). HD also says the piano player is May (HD has given WR her last name and phone number), who played with a lot of good bands. HD mentions [James] "Sing" [Miller]; JH says he plays with him now, in Earl Foster's band [at the Harmony Inn?RBA.]

HD and JH talk about how good the Kid Rena band was when they were in it; they both played alto saxophone in the band; HD says Don Redman and others from New York wondered how the band got such a full sound with so few instruments. JH attributes his speed on alto to practice. He also played soprano [saxophone] "and all that kind of stuff" [i.e., other saxophones?RBA].

JH began fooling around with his father's clarinet after moving to New Orleans; JH moved to New Orleans when he was nine years old. The only band JH remembers from his childhood in Litcher was that of Anthony Holmes, which he heard only at rehearsals, being too young to attend dances; he says they were good; they traveled around the area, including trips to Baton

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Rouge and New Orleans. JH mentions contests of bands, possibly with flags which were held; dance bands from all over the area would participate; JH thinks the Holmes band won such a contest. JH hasn't been back to Lutchter much; he did play a parade and dance there, with Worthia "Show Boy" Thomas, trombone and leader; JH comments that it was before he himself got arthritis in the legs.

JH didn't take lessons from his father, but did study with Emile Riley, [i.e., Amos Riley] a good teacher; (JH and Howard Davis, business agent for the union [Local 496], began studying with Riley at the same time); JH says a son of Riley, Theodore Riley, now plays [trumpet] with Joe Jones. After Emile Riley die, JH began studying with Davy Jones (another good one, says HD0, who had a music shop on Rampart Street, with his teaching studio behind that. Jones had a good student band, which played some Sunday afternoons at the Astoria, just to be playing and to be heard. JH, who used a method book in his music studies, says the methods of today are much harder than when he was learning. JH says he learned most of his reading from being with various bands; the musicians in those bands would take time out to help him learn; JH says if he hadn't had help when he first joined Celestin, he probably wouldn't have been able to remain in the band, but he learned, and eventually had first chair. JH says his first real break was when he joined Cèlestin; later, Dave Bartholomew heard of him, and he joined Bartholomew; JH recorded with Fats Domino, with Thomas Ridgley, with ^{Jewel}~~Jules~~ King, with

Lloyd Price, Bobby Mitchell, Joe Turner and almost all the fellows who recorded. Joe Turner worked with JH at the Gypsy Tea Room; Turner is the [famous] singer from Kansas City.

The best alto saxophone players around New Orleans when JH was coming up: John Handy, Theodore Purnell, Adelphe "Tats" Alexander [Junior]; Son Johnson; Oliver Alcorn (now in Chicago). HD says Alcorn was in the [Clarence] Desdune band with him, around 1928 and 1929. OA was also with Celestin. JH didn't rate Earl Foucher with the other saxophone players mentioned. JH mentions that Theodore Purnell played fine clarinet at a job at Milne Boys's Home a couple of weeks ago; Purnell is not allowed to play more than two or three hours at a time, as he has suffered a stroke. HD says he taught Purnell his first note. JH says Purnell plays [clarinet?] something like the president of the local, [Louis] Cottrell [Jr.], "a boy who plays plenty of clarinet."

JH was in California in 1951 or 1952 for about a month; he describes the tour the band (Dave Bartholomew's) made; Fats Domino was with the band then; JH has recorded a lot with Domino, and was on the record, "The Fat Man", which made Domino famous, as well as "Detroit City" and about seven more. JH recorded "Three Times Seven" and "Shrewsbury Blues" [among others] with Thomas Ridgley. JH played the "High Society" clarinet solo on alto saxophone for a record he made with Bartholomew. [Compare discographies. DeLuxe 3217] [Backed by] "Girtown."

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Henry Harding, with whom JH worked at the Rhythm Club
(Jackson Avenue at Derbigny), from where they also broadcasted,
has died. Some in the Harding band at the time: Jack Lamont "Lamothe"
and JH, alto saxophone; Harding [check spelling] tenor saxophone.

End of Reel I

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Some of the personnel of Henry Harding's, [check spelling] band, at the Rhythm Club: Harding, tenor saxophone; JH and Jack Lamont, alto saxophones; ^{E Charles "Ollie" Thomas} Ollie Parker, bass; Louis Givens [check spelling] piano; JH doesn't remember who played trumpet or drums; there was no trombone. JH thinks the time was before he joined [Kid Rena and] HD; HD says he thinks it was after that time.

JH doesn't remember the names of any of the blues he recorded with Joe Turner; Turner was recording for Atlantic when JH worked with him. JH says Turner makes "sections" [i.e., recording sessions] any time or place, depending on how he feels at the moment. All the sessions with Turner were recorded at the J & M Studios, on Rampart Street (WR says [Cosimo] Matassa [of J & M] is now on ^[321-521] Gov. Nicholls Street). JH says Dave Bartholomew is a representative of Imperial Recording Company, and he thinks Bartholomew and Matassa do business together. Turner has worked at the Dew Drop [Inn] with JH; Turner comes to New Orleans sporadically, remaining a few weeks at the time. Wynonie Harris has worked at the Dew Drop with JH; "Little Miss Cornshucks" also worked there with JH, and was recorded at the J & M with JH, who was with Dave Bartholomew then, when they were playing at the Pelican; Thomas Ridgley was singing with Bartholomew then. WR asks if Tommy Ridgley was singing with Bartholomew then, when they were playing at the Pelican; Thomas Ridgley is any relation to old time trombonist, Bebé Ridgley [Yes. RBA]; JH is reminded that he worked with Bebé Ridgley's [Young Tuxedo" at the Owls's Club;

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Louis Armstrong had his own band at the Suburban Garden then [1931]. Some others in Ridgley's band at the time: Sam Dutrey [Jr.] [saxophone (and clarinet?)]; JH; Gilbert Young [, trumpet]; Emma Barrett, piano. HD explains that when Celestin and Ridgley broke up [their partnership band], they each took part of the band and formed new one; JH says one was then called the Young Tuxedo and the other, the Old Tuxedo [Compare Bebe Ridgley, reel ?]. JH says Sam Dutrey now lives in Opelousas [Louisiana]. JH says he and Dutrey worked together with Kid Clayton and also with Joe Robichaux; JH was not with the Robichaux band that recorded in the Thirties. JH says that [David] Van Dyke, who played tenor saxophone with him [in Robichaux's band?], led Buddy Johnson's band. HD played with Robichaux at the Jackson (or Jax) Room; when Robichaux went on the road, HD sent his cousin, Maurice Jessom [spelling?] in his place; Jessom no longer plays.

JH says there are a lot of musicians in New Orleans who no longer play, as there are not so many clubs open now as there once were; he says he knows of only one [Negro] night club, the Dew Drop, which is operating; HD says there is one on Jackson Avenue, near a supermarket. Halls where dances are held now are the Autocrats club and the I.L.A. Hall (the latter on Claiborne between Washington and Fourth). HD says Red Tyler is playing at another hall, up on Carrollton; JH says Tyler was with Bartholomew at one time, and that Tyler is a fine arranger.

JH never played with old man Dorsey, although he played with many of his own father's friends. JH's father died around 1930, and was around forty-five or forty-six years old. JH's mother is around seventy-two or seventy-three years old now. JH thinks his father began playing violin, as there was a violin around the house, and JH fooled around with it when he wasn't fooling around with his father's clarinet.

[F. Huntley] Huntley, Gardette, trumpet player and bricklayer, native of New Orleans, died in Detroit, is mentioned; JH says he and Gardette had the band at Chinatown (Eighth and LaSalle); [Fornell?], guitar, was the leader of the band; Henry Russ was playing drums in the group (JH says Russ later took up trumpet, and later still, bass, which he now plays).

In Kid Rena's band with JH: HD; Joe René [sic], drums; [William]Houston, piano; Clarence Tisdale, guitar; Percy Gabriel, bass. HD says that when Gabriel first came on the job, he could hardly play, but he very quickly became one of the best bass players around here; in 1936, HD took Gabriel with him to New York, where Gabriel was offered a job at the Big Apple. JH's job with Rena was at the Gypsy Tea Room where they played for about two years. HD says that before JH joined the Rena band, a man who now has a shoe shop on Claiborne, and who lives next to George Guesnon, played alto and clarinet [with Rena]. [See page 11.]

When he left Kid Rena, JH went with Papa Celestin; from Celestin, he joined Earl Foster, with whom he has been about twelve years. The Foster band makes some short trips (forty to fifty miles)

now; JH says they were at the College Inn in Thibodaux [Louisiana] for four years, where they played a certain part of each year. The Foster band also stayed at the Club Plantation in Bogalusa [Louisiana] for quite a while; the band commuted from New Orleans, as Foster worked on big trucks during the day.

JH has never worked at anything but music; his father was foreman of the laundry department at D. H. Holmes [department store].

Walter De La Rose is the name of the saxophone-clarinet player JH replaced in Kid Rena's band, says HD. JH came off Bourbon Street, where he had been working with Smiling Joe, to work with Rena. JH also worked with Smiley Lewis [spelling?], appearing on several of Lewis's good-selling records, i.e., "The Bells Are Ringing" and "Lillie Mae" [Imperial 5194, 10", 78 rpm]; JH also played with Lewis for eight weeks in Nashville, Tennessee, working every night at some diner.

JH played alto saxophone in funerals with old man [Henry] Allen [Sr.] 's brass band, and funerals with George Williams's brass band; JH played with many brass bands, from the Eureka Brass Band to the [Young?] Tuxedo Brass Band; he recalls working Labor Day parades with brass bands, when several bands would be playing the same job.

JH tells how he got arthritis; he says it was from being over-tired on a tour he made with a band; he was operated on, and emerged from the hospital crippled.

Discussion of "project" job on Charity Hospital psychiatric floor.

* JH doesn't remember Eddie Jackson. JH played with Henry Allen's brass band during the Depression.

Talk of wages on various jobs; HD says he got seventy-five cents per night at the Black Cat, on Decatur Street. JH mentions that he, Smiling Joe, [Alton? Elton?] and [Louie Woods?] were the combo working at the Kingfish, on Decatur; HD says he was working at the Popeye [same street] then. JH tells of passing the kitty for the band. JH says he made big tips at the Famous Door [Bourbon Street]. JH tells of big tippers, and says one big tipper took them to the Old Absinthe House, where Fats Pichon was playing, and paid them well to play only one number.

Little Cato was playing with Celestin when JH worked with him; JH tells HD that he has already named all the personnel in that band except the drummer [see Reel I].

HD mentions the Olympia Band of Arnold Depass.

When JH first started playing music, he went to Houma, Louisiana, to play with the band of Vincent Lopresto, an Italian; JH worked there with [or for?] him for about four weeks, at a club; ~~La~~ Preston[?] was from New Orleans. George McCullum was on trumpet; Willie O'Connell was playing banjo; Teddy Johnson played alto saxophone as did JH. (Johnson now plays tenor, and is working at a club at St. Louis and Bourbon, JH thinks).

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Photo of Dave Bartholomew's band (less the leader, who was sick then) is shown and discussed. Other photos shown and discussed, among them, one at the Pelican; talk of the Pelican. Bartholomew photo again: JH points out ^[HERBERT] ~~Herbert~~ Hardesty, tenor, now with Fats Domino (HD says he plays trumpet, too); Frank Fields, bass; JH, alto; Earl Palmer, drums (with a studio in California, says HD); Ernest McLean (a genius, says JH--HD says McLean went to join Palmer in the studio, but had to come back because his mother died), guitar; Thomas Ridgley [, vocal?,]; ^(Dusset) Salvador Dussec [spelling?] piano. The picture was taken at the Pelican about 1955 or 1956. HD ^says he bought Earl Palmer his first set of drums. HD mentions May [piano]. HD says he bet August [Lanoix] can name the members of the band in the photo [of a band with JH's father--see Reel I]; August is in the band, playing sousaphone.

Earl Foster is mentioned again.

End of Reel II

